

# DAVID BALDACCI

Teaches Mystery and Thriller writing

Dabney in Chatterly  
 ← V-spec  
 Refer to Ephie Dabney


① How did Dabney know of plot - let [redacted]  
 Maybe he initially agreed to get info  
 ② Later, explain better the need  
 where the tunnel would intersect.  
 ③ when at end has FBI security guard.  
 ④ M.E.: no plastic surgery on [redacted]

Would she do the [redacted] home trip - MD Anderson  
 (p. 15) She might [redacted] explain his shooting (B) - insane.



**I**N THIS COURSE, David brings his considerable talents to the classroom, showing you the craft techniques that have made his books bestsellers all over the world. His 38 adult novels and 7 children's books have sold more than 130 million copies. His work has been translated into 45 languages, published in 80 countries, and adapted for film and television. Here, he'll take you on a journey through the business side of writing and introduce you to the strategies he uses to pitch ideas, work with agents and editors, and negotiate deals with publishers. Most of all, he'll train and encourage you to develop your own passions. As David makes clear, all of the tools and techniques he teaches are optional: Take what suits you and ignore the rest, because the fundamental advice from this master teacher is learn from others while honoring your own interests and styles.

"I've always defined myself as not just being a thriller writer, but as kind of a thriller/mystery writer."



Welcome to David Baldacci's MasterClass.



## [GLOSSARY OF TERMS]

By definition, suspense is a state of agitated uncertainty about what will happen next. In modern writing, the term *thriller* is often used to mean a novel of suspense. The category is so named because authors use specific techniques to keep readers guessing about what will happen and to create feelings of anticipation and excitement as the story unfolds. The genre has many subtypes, like legal, espionage, political, and psychological. Mysteries and thrillers both fall into the category of suspense, but each has its own distinct way of creating excitement:

### ~~M~~YSTERIES

Mysteries usually focus on a crime and the investigator who has to solve it. In this genre, suspense is generated by withholding information. A reader's interest grows as the questions pile up: Who killed the woman? Why did the killer mutilate the body? Will the killer strike again? The reader doesn't know the answers to these questions, and curiosity keeps their interest piqued. Some classic examples of mysteries include *Murder on the Orient Express* (1935) by Agatha Christie and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) by Arthur Conan Doyle.

### ~~T~~HRILLERS

In thrillers, the protagonist is usually fighting a villain or a powerful organization. These stories are characterized by high-intensity situations, near-constant danger, and a rapid pace. Most of the suspense comes when you reveal what's going to happen, often letting the reader know more than the characters do. Let's say your main character is about to meet a contact at a warehouse, but your reader knows that the villain has been lying in wait at the warehouse for 10 pages already. The reader experiences anticipation and dread because they see something your hero doesn't—that he or she's walking into a trap. *The Bourne Identity* (1980) by Robert Ludlum and *Eye of the Needle* (1978) by Ken Follett are some classic examples of thrillers.

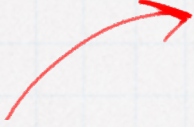
### ~~M~~YSTERY/ ~~T~~HRILLERS

In this hybrid genre, both elements are used in the main storyline. The TV show *The Fugitive* (1963) is a classic example. Half of the story is a thriller: Dr. Richard Kimble, who's wrongly accused of murdering his wife, escapes from prison and goes on the lam, all while being chased by authorities. The other half is a mystery: Kimble must find the identity of his wife's true killer. David's books often fall into this category, with both genres holding equal weight in the storylines of many of his books. For classic examples of mystery/thrillers, see *Rebecca* (1938) by Daphne du Maurier and *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) by Dan Brown.



**LEARN MORE**

If you're new to David's work, you have an amazing variety of books to choose from. Most of his novels are part of a series—consider starting with the first novel in any of the following, which David references throughout the course:



"Don't sit down tomorrow and try to write a book like David Baldacci would write a book. That is not going to work for you because you don't happen to be me."

**The King and Maxwell series**

When Michelle Maxwell's Secret Service career is wrecked by a split-second mistake, she goes hunting for answers. The quest leads her to another disgraced agent, Sean King, whose earlier failure and ouster from the Secret Service has eerie parallels to her own. Drawn together by circumstance, it's really their chemistry that turns these two into excellent private investigators.

*Split Second* (2003)  
*Hour Game* (2004)  
*Simple Genius* (2007)  
*First Family* (2009)  
*The Sixth Man* (2011)  
*King and Maxwell* (2013)

**The Camel Club series**

This unofficial club is composed of four former government employees who've taken it upon themselves to investigate conspiracies in Washington, D.C. These watchdogs are led by Oliver Stone, a former CIA-trained assassin who renamed himself after the much-admired film director.

*The Camel Club* (2005)  
*The Collectors* (2006)  
*Stone Cold* (2007)  
*Divine Justice* (2008)  
*Hell's Corner* (2010)

**The John Puller series**

John Puller is a brilliant Army Special Agent who gets assigned the hard cases, probably because he's the only one who can pull them off. He's a fiercely determined investigator and an inveterate loner. Yet he can't seem to get away from his difficult family: a father who's a war hero and a brother who's in prison for treason.

*Zero Day* (2011)  
*The Forgotten* (2012)  
*The Escape* (2014)  
*No Man's Land* (2016)



**The Will Robie series**

Tasked with identifying threats to the United States, then carrying out top-secret hits to protect the nation, Will Robie is one of the most accomplished assassins in the world. But his job comes at a steep personal cost. The series launches when Robie discovers that the U.S. government has put a hit out on him.

*The Innocent* (2012)

*The Hit* (2013)

*Bullseye* (2014)—novella, crossover with the Camel Club series

*The Target* (2014)

*The Guilty* (2015)

*End Game* (2017)

**The Amos Decker series**

A sports injury left Amos Decker with hyperthymesia, or perfect memory recall, but as a police investigator, he saw a lot of things he'd rather forget—in particular, his dead wife and daughter, who were murdered by a madman in their house. The series begins with Decker hunting for that madman but evolves as he joins an FBI special task force to handle cases where his memory skills may be the only way to solve the crimes.

*Memory Man* (2015)

*The Last Mile* (2016)

*The Fix* (2017)

*The Fallen* (2018)

*Redemption* (2019)

**The following standalone novels by David are also worthwhile reads in the context of this class:**

*Absolute Power* (1996)

*Last Man Standing* (2001)



## ASSIGNMENTS

There will be two types of coursework in this class. If you're looking to write a novel, "Writing Exercises" will help you develop your characters, your story, and your setting, giving you a chance to practice the techniques David teaches in this class. "For Your Working Novel" sections will apply to you if you've already developed (or partially developed) your manuscript and want to fine-tune or strengthen it.

Keep a notebook or a separate electronic folder specifically for this course. Many of the assignments will refer back to and build on previous ones, so you'll want to have all of your notes in one place for easy reference.

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From the class lesson:

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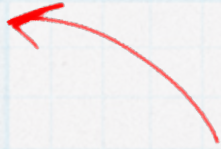
**D**AVID INTRODUCES the “writer’s prism,” which uses your own creativity to put an unexpected spin on real-life events. He also shares ways to generate and build ideas.

### THE WRITER’S PRISM

Inspiration can come from the unlikeliest of places. Famous writers have been inspired by dreams (Stephanie Meyer), drug trips (William Burroughs), conversations (Margaret Atwood), and travel (J.K. Rowling). Most of David’s ideas are observation-based: He has a knack for taking even the simplest or most mundane things he witnesses day-to-day and twisting them into dark, elaborate tales. For example, watching tourists and gardeners in front of the White House gave David an idea for the plot of *The Target* (2014), where spies signal each other on the White House lawn. David calls this the “writer’s prism.”

Observation is critical, so next time you leave the house, don’t be afraid to let your mind wander, link up seemingly unrelated events, speculate wildly, and take a mysterious turn. Even if it doesn’t come naturally, you can develop the ability to observe the world around you and channel your creativity into describing what you see in unexpected ways.

If you’d like to read or listen to the roving NPR interview that David mentions in the lecture, it’s available [here](#). It provides an excellent example of how David sees the world through his own writer’s prism.



“I think if you’re a writer, you have to be receptive to what the world gives you, and then you have to run it through your filter of creativity. Out the other end comes an original idea.”



## THE IMPORTANCE OF MORAL COMPLEXITY

While choosing a central conflict for your story, it's good practice to look for real-life problems that have the kind of moral complexity that will sustain an entire novel. Avoid black-and-white issues. Instead, search for situations, settings, or characters that are complicated to avoid providing readers with easy answers. Maybe certain people in the government are doing something amoral, such as hiring an assassin to kill a beloved world leader. But perhaps the motivation behind the act is based on a need to protect their own country. This kind of complexity can generate conflict between characters and add richness to your plot. If the moral lines between good and bad are too easy to determine, you may find your story becoming predictable, and your readers won't be as authentically engaged.

“My job as a thriller writer is to look out into the real world and see the dark side.”

Will Robie is a highly trained U.S. government assassin and the main character of one of David's most popular and critically acclaimed series that begins with *The Innocent* (2012). Robie is a great example of moral complexity. He's a good man who wants to protect his country, but sometimes in order to do that, he has to hunt down and kill people.

## MAKING ROOM FOR NONFICTION IN FICTION

David's books strike a balance between fictional creation and real-world fact. Nonfiction finds its way into his novels through his settings, and he likes to use current events to guide the problems his characters face. In the late 2000s, scientific research began to reveal that head-trauma injuries were common among football players. David's interest in this issue led him to create Amos Decker, the main character of the Memory Man series. Amos suffered a head injury while playing football, and David's “writer's prism” transformed that into a case of hyperthymesia, or perfect memory recall. The ongoing opioid crisis in America inspired Decker's investigation in *The Fallen* (2018). You'll learn more about research in later chapters, but make a habit of saving news articles, interviews, or any other real-world information that interests you, and set aside a specific place to keep all this inspiration. And be curious about the world. Read as much as you can about a variety of subjects. The broader your field of knowledge, the better your chances are of bringing together disparate elements into a truly original plot.

“I like to entertain, but I also like to inform.”



## WRITE WHAT YOU'RE PASSIONATE ABOUT

Passion—for your story, for your subject matter, for honing your craft—is key when it comes to developing a novel. It is fuel for your writerly tank. Not only will it sustain your interest in what will likely be a long project, but it will come through in your book. Having a passion for your work doesn't have to be an elaborate, all-consuming obsession—it can be as simple as stoking your interest in the subjects that matter to you, the things that interest you, the types of people you're drawn to, and the settings that you love. Consider the following while developing passion for your project:

**You don't have to be an expert.** Some of the best novels have tackled topics their authors knew little or nothing about when they started writing. Their interests guided their research and ultimately their stories. Michael Crichton had a background in medicine, but his novels delved into subjects as diverse as historical crime (*The Great Train Robbery*, 1975), dinosaurs and genetic science (*Jurassic Park*, 1990), and natural disasters (*Twister*, 1996). Often, topics you're initially unfamiliar with can sustain your interest more powerfully over a longer period of time.

**You can also be an expert.** Don't underestimate your long-term passions just because they're so familiar to you. John le Carré was an MI6 agent for a decade before he wrote the now-classic novel *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1963). The novel was an indictment of espionage, but le Carré went on to publish spy novels until 2017. His obvious interest in spycraft laid the foundation for a long and illustrious career.

**Look for multiple interests and bring them together.** The commonalities between your disparate interests may not be obvious at first, but all that's required to find connections between unlikely things is creativity. Dan Brown was interested in the Catholic Church, but he was also obsessed with code-breaking, conspiracy theories, and modern science. Putting these elements together seemed unlikely at the time, but it led to the wildly successful *The Da Vinci Code* (2003).



**Don't chase trends unless they're in line with your passions.** Mario Puzo spent years writing serious literary novels about Italian immigrants in America and became so frustrated with his lack of success that he decided to write something with blatant mainstream appeal. But he couldn't leave his true passions behind. The result was *The Godfather* (1969), an unforgettable crime novel that introduced the world to the inner workings of a New York Mafia family.

## ASSIGNMENTS

### WRITING EXERCISES

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1. Title a page in your notebook "Interests," and begin listing all of the things that you feel passionate about right now. These can be as large or small as you'd like. Include everything you can think of, from big events on the national news all the way down to personal details, like your favorite athlete. Freewrite until you fill the page. Once you're done, scan the list and look for connections between your interests.
2. Use your writer's prism. Go out into the world and observe an ordinary scene. Write it down in your notebook, filling at least one page with a description of the setting and the people in it. Now change the story, and imagine that everything you've just described is not what it seems, but that a whole secret underworld exists within the scene. The characters are not who you think they are. Let yourself be paranoid. Write another page going into more detail about the hidden dark side of the characters and the scene.
3. Practice David's assignment for learning to generate ideas. Select two stories at random from any news source, and link them in a plausible way. On a page in your notebook, write down a description of the ways in which the two stories are secretly related. Tease out unexpected connections between the people and elements of both stories. Don't be afraid to make unusual leaps. As a novelist, you're bound only by plausibility. And well-constructed stories can make many things plausible.



## FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

The following exercise is a place to consider how to deepen the moral complexity of your story. In a page in your notebook, create a three-column chart. In the first column, list all of your characters and the setting elements that appear in your novel so far. (These could be places, institutions, cultures, and social values.) In the next column, write a quick description of each element. Use the final column to brainstorm ways that your characters and setting elements can be made more complex. Use this column to freewrite. Remember to move away from obvious good-versus-evil conceits and into gray areas where morality is less clear. Let's say you're writing a novel about a husband and wife who lose their jobs and who are forced to move from New York City to Missouri. Your list might look something like this:

NAME	DESCRIPTION	COMPLICATIONS
Amy Dunne	Frustrated writer, angry at leaving NYC	She seems like a victim, but what if she's a psychopath? What if her victimhood is just a cover, and deep down she's manipulative? What if her manipulations come from authentic, deep-seated resentments about having to compromise?
Nick Dunne	Former celebrated journalist, cares about his family, trying to make ends meet	He seems so normal, such an intelligent writer and a "golden boy," but what if he's actually petty and self-serving? Maybe cheating on his wife? Maybe secretly hates her? Maybe a coward?
Media circus	Amy disappears, and society blames Nick before the court case even begins	Media is supposed to reveal truths about injustice, but in doing that they actually create public opinion, not always based on facts. Appearances matter more than facts. Maybe Nick lies to the media? Maybe he feels he has to lie in order to reveal the truth?


If you don't recognize these elements, pick up *Gone Girl* (2012) to see how Gillian Flynn plays with moral gray areas, never quite letting the reader feel certain of good or evil.

Remember to let your story ideas percolate. Once you've written an idea down, take some time away from it—this could be a few days or weeks—and go back to it later to reevaluate.



**R**ESearch FOR A NOVEL is a multifaceted undertaking that can begin before your writing starts and last until your final proofread. David suggests starting your research by reading things that inspire you. He shares strategies for real-world research—the battle plan you’ll need to get you interviewing people and visiting places—and he discusses the importance of selecting locations for your novel.

“Research can help you be a better writer, in that it can give you a really emotional connection to what you’re writing about.”



### LIVE YOUR RESEARCH

One of the primary goals of fiction writing is to present a make-believe story that is sufficiently believable. Your world doesn’t have to be the real one—it can be fantasy of any type—but it must feel as if it could be real. You want the reader to forget that they’re holding a book. You want them to lose themselves in the narrative, to care about the characters, and become deeply invested in what happens to them. No matter where your mystery/thriller is set or who your characters are, you want it to be credible and convincing. In most cases, you’ll need research to do this.

In the early stages of research, you’ll most likely be looking for inspiration. Use the following tips to begin building ideas for your topics, settings, and characters:

**Download a research-organizing tool.** Google Keep and Evernote both allow you to store all your materials in a handy place from the start.



**Browse online for setting inspiration.** Keep a Pinterest board of places your characters will go. Take notes on setting details from photographs online. And check out the phenomenal resources from Google Street View, which not only give you “street views” but take you into most of the world’s notable sites.

**Build characters online.** Scanning through faces is an excellent way to begin visualizing your characters. Do you think your protagonist might be a marksman? Run online searches for marksmanship competitions or famous snipers. Search YouTube for relevant content to get a sense of how your character might dress and talk. Browse through photos of actors and actresses to begin picturing your main characters in your mind.

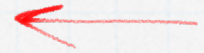
## CREATE A BATTLE PLAN

Once you’ve begun to formulate your setting and your characters, you’ll want to take your research into the real world. When possible, go to the places you want to see in your novel. Visiting a place in person will not only create an emotional connection that will lend authenticity to your writing later, it will also jump-start ideas for what your characters might do in those places. Talk to specialists who do the same things your characters do or who know a lot about the elements of your world. For this stage of research, you’ll need a battle plan, so keep David’s tips in mind:

**Create an itinerary.** You may not be the planning type, but checklists can be critical for finishing tasks. Make a list of goals for yourself and calculate the amount of time you’ll need for each one. Arrange interviews beforehand, and confirm them a day or two before the event.

**Pack intelligently.** Consider which tools you want to bring along: pens, paper, electronic devices, voice recorders, microphones, cameras, measuring tape, flashlights, etc.

**Allow flexibility.** Don’t cram too many things into your schedule when visiting the sites. If a certain location captures a sudden interest, you’ll want time to explore it. The things you stumble upon can be even more interesting than the things you’ve planned.




“You have to take off the novelist’s hat and put on a journalist’s cap.”



**Use proxies.** Maybe that trip to Tokyo is out of your price range. Maybe you'd like to research a country that doesn't issue tourist visas, like Saudi Arabia. In cases where you can't actually go to a place, find and talk to people who have been there—or who are still there. Don't just rely on one person; seek out as many as you can. Martin Cruz Smith wrote most of *Gorky Park* (1981) based on in-depth interviews with Russian expats. They turned out to be far more forthcoming than their counterparts in Moscow.

**Be creative.** Maybe your novel is set in a world that's more imaginary than most. You can't go to that island you created where scientists are bringing dinosaurs back to life, because it doesn't exist, but you could go in search of inspiration for your island—maybe Costa Rica or the volcanic islands of Hawaii. Sometimes you'll need to piece together elements from different locations to create your story, so let your imagination guide you in your travel plans.

But if you can't venture to a particular location, or can't do so as fully as you would like, check to see if there's a YouTube video that might assist you in that regard.



"Locations are critical to a novel because they can become a character in the novel, particularly if it's an extraordinary sort of place."

Treat locations as if they were characters. This can mean any place your characters go—cities, landmarks, suburbs, wilderness, buildings, vehicles, etc. Research everything that interests you about these places, allowing their various moods to appear on the page and most of all getting all your facts straight about them. Often, a location will help guide your story. For example, if your characters need to race from the Statue of Liberty all the way up to Harlem in less than an hour in commuter traffic, they'll have to be very clever—or fail miserably and face the consequences.


If you're looking for tips on how to render your world, check out *Writing Vivid Settings: Professional Techniques for Fiction Authors* (2015) by Rayne Hall or *A Writer's Guide to Active Setting* (2016) by Mary Buckham. Both books provide tools to help in create and describe settings.



## DON'T REGURGITATE YOUR RESEARCH

The question of how to reveal information—and how much to reveal—is central to all suspense writing. In general, you should keep information concise: Tell the reader only what they need to know. It's even better if you can tell them slightly less than they'd want to know so that they stay curious. (Thriller writers are famous for the amount of research they do for their nonfiction subject matter, so it's a little ironic that they have to leave so much of the actual information out of their novels.) Most of the research you do won't make it into your final draft. For more information on when and how to reveal information, read *Mastering Suspense, Structure, and Plot* (2016) by Jane K. Cleland. Jane gives an excellent overview of what sort of information should be revealed at what speed, and she offers various techniques on how to do it.

There is one exception to the leave-research-out rule: techno-thrillers, a subgenre first created and popularized by Tom Clancy, is beloved in part because its authors lavish technical details on their stories. Clancy's first Jack Ryan novel, *The Hunt for Red October* (1984), took months of intensive research. He stuffed so much detail into the manuscript that his publishers had him cut more than 100 pages, most of which was technical description, and the end product still contained an abundance of facts about submarines, weapons, the navy, and espionage, ultimately conveying a convincing picture of Jack Ryan's world.



"If you do nothing else of what I'm telling you on research, do this: Leave almost all of it out. You will thank me later."



## ASSIGNMENTS

### WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. On a page in your notebook titled “Research Interests,” make a list of the things you want to learn more about. For help with this, go back to the page in your notebook titled “Interests” from Chapter 2: Finding the Idea. Is there anything there that you need to research? You don’t have to have many topics, but for each one you write, include any subtopics that interest you. For example, if one of your research topics is nautical skills, subtopics might include navigation, ship handling, wind patterns, and boating terminology. You’re still in the brainstorming stage, so don’t worry about being totally thorough right now. Just let your ideas flow.
2. To begin choosing locations for your story, title a page in your notebook “My Locations” and answer the following questions:
  - What is your favorite spot in the world?
  - Where have you always wanted to go but have never been?
  - What’s your favorite city?
  - Your favorite building?
  - Your favorite landscape?
  - What place makes you most uncomfortable?
  - What places do you avoid?
  - Where would your ideal office or place of work be?

Make your answers as long or short as you’d like. If one of these questions in particular piques your interest, write about it in as much detail as you can.

3. This exercise will help you develop an understanding of what these locations mean to you and how you might use them in your writing. On a new sheet in your notebook, write down the first place that comes to mind when you read the words below. It can be anything—a room, a vehicle, a building, a city street, a town, or a place in the wilderness. Don’t think too much about it. Just write down your first reaction.



- Ugly
- Charming
- Dangerous
- Cruel
- Breathtaking
- Cinematic
- Homey
- Depressing
- Nostalgic
- Sexy
- Sacred
- Monumental

### FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

1. For the research you may still need to do for your novel, use the following guidelines to come up with a battle plan. This doesn't have to be set in stone—always allow yourself to veer off course when inspiration strikes. Write each category in your notebook and your responses beneath it to help formulate your plan.
  - What are the research topics to be covered?
  - What do you generally hope to become familiar with?
  - Are there any specific questions you need answered?
  - Are there any people you need to speak with? This can be general or specific.
  - What preparations do you need to make beforehand? For example, setting up interviews, getting access to private locations, confirming hours of businesses, libraries, or institutions, etc.
  - List the travel arrangements you need to make, if necessary. This can include flights, car rides, hotels, food, etc.
  - What tools will you need for gathering materials? Computers, notebooks, cameras, etc.
  - What is your time frame? How many hours per day can you devote to this project?



2. Choose a page or scene from your work-in-progress and analyze it for credibility by answering the following questions:
  - Are your descriptive details specific and concrete?
  - Is your character's behavior in line with their situation? Do their responses make sense for them?
  - Can you fact-check anything? If so, do it now.
  
3. Choose a location from your novel, and write a paragraph about it from the point of view of one of the characters below. Make sure the details emerge from the character's sensory experience of the place, so remember to include smells and sounds and perhaps first impressions. Try to make your details unique and unexpected.
  - An elderly woman on her deathbed
  - A foreign visitor who is lost
  - A young couple falling in love
  - A homeless teenage boy and his dog
  - A woman who has just been mugged
  - A greedy investor



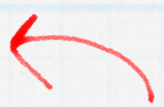
**D**AVID SHARES his protocols for interviewing subjects. He also looks at the limitations of research: when to stretch beyond it and when to stop.

#### USE YOUR NETWORK AS A SOURCE

Interviews can be intimidating. From securing a meeting to conducting the interview itself and ensuring that you're gathering all the information you need, it's a consuming task. But the benefits of interviews go way beyond the simple gathering of information. You'll be meeting real-life people who can inspire story elements, encourage your interest, and provide unexpected inspiration. They may even help you make future connections for further research. Consider all of David's advice when planning for interviews:

**Find connections through friends or family.** You can always cold-call the Secret Service and ask if they'd be willing to speak to you, but when an agent is meeting you as a favor for a mutual friend, you'll already have established a connection, and chances are good that they'll give you a bit more time and energy.

**Never go in cold turkey.** Prepare for your interview by learning as much as you can up front. It's respectful to get as much general background as you can about the person you're interviewing, about their job and their area of expertise. It also means you'll spend less time covering the basics during the interview. This will probably win the respect of your subject and encourage a deeper level of dialogue from him or her.



"Use your periphery of friends and acquaintances, and 9 times out of 10 you'll get a connection somewhere."



**Prepare your goals.** Make a list of the things you're hoping to learn. Consider the following goals: the subject's behavior at work, their knowledge as well as their opinions and feelings about it, what their sensory experience is like, their past experiences, and their future goals.

**Bring the right tools.** You'll probably want to record your interviews. This will make it easier for you to comb through the information later and will free you from having to write everything down (which can distract you during the interview). Always confirm with your subject that you have their permission to record them. Invest in a good recorder or a voice-recording app.

**Courtesy is key.** Don't assume that the subject will give you everything you need. They may be busy or bound by confidentiality about certain subjects. Respect their boundaries—if they say no to recording the interview, then don't do it. If they can give you only 15 minutes when you asked for an hour, take it, and be sure to make the most of your time. When the interview is over, don't assume you can continue contacting them. Instead, ask if it would be all right to reach out with follow-up questions, and confirm the best way to do that.

**Respecting confidentiality is essential.** In many interviews, it's important to address terms of confidentiality both before and after the interview. You should make it plain what your intentions are, so feel free to explain a little about your novel and your goals, and confirm with the subject that you'll be using what they tell you as inspiration for your writing. If there is ever a moment when they ask for secrecy, respect it.

**Use open-ended questions.** Generally speaking, there are two types of interview questions: Closed-ended questions, which invite a response of either "yes" or "no," and open-ended questions, which encourage a subject to speak in more depth and detail. David has found that open-ended questions work best for his own research purposes: He'll choose topics that he'd like to discuss and try to guide the conversation toward those things. This tactic allows your interview subject plenty of space to talk freely and share whatever information they'd like, which can often reveal things you may not have thought to ask.



Here are a few examples of closed-ended and open-ended questions:

CLOSED-ENDED	OPEN-ENDED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Do you face challenges at work?</li> <li>· Do you make decisions alone?</li> <li>· Are you happy?</li> <li>· Do you enjoy your job?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· What kinds of challenges are you facing?</li> <li>· Who else is involved in decision-making?</li> <li>· What are some of the perks of the job?</li> <li>· Why did you decide to do this work?</li> </ul>

If you'd like more techniques for interviewing people, check out Jane Friedman's short e-book [\*How Do I Conduct a Strong Interview?\*](#) (2006). Friedman is known for her excellent and practical writing advice. Here she covers topics like getting people to discuss things they're reluctant to share and how to prompt interesting anecdotes.

### PLAUSIBILITY, NOT PROBABILITY, IS YOUR MAIN CONCERN

One of the potential pitfalls of doing research is that much of what you learn will be so real that it may begin to restrict your imagination. Learning facts can set a boundary of concrete reality around your creative mind and put a damper on your more fantastical ideas. If this happens, remember David's principle that you are bound only by plausibility. In other words, if it *could* happen, then you can write about it. Just remember the advice from Chapter 3: Research Methods and Sources, Part 1: You also want your novel to be credible and convincing.

←  
"My rule of thumb as a novelist is: I'm bound only by plausibility."

→  
"No research is as hard as actually writing the story."

### DON'T PUT OFF THE ACTUAL WRITING

Research can easily become procrastination. The more you read about your subject, the more you'll learn. You may even get lost in it. A good rule of thumb is to begin writing as soon as you can. Once you've got enough information about your characters and setting to start writing scenes—no matter how short—jot them down in your notebook. Research is an ongoing process, so don't let it stop you from the actual work of writing.



If you're having trouble getting started or staying on task, you may benefit from these techniques:

### **The Pomodoro Method**

Developed in the 1990s by Italian author Francesco Cirillo, this über-simple method involves only one device: a timer. (Cirillo's was shaped like a tomato—*pomodoro* in Italian.) Set your timer for 25 minutes, and write for that period only; then take a short break and start again. Breaking your workload into small tasks can be a huge productivity boost.

### **Gamification**

Come up with doable goals for yourself, like writing for an hour every morning, and use a goal-tracking app like Productive, Streaks, or Momentum to track your progress. Most apps will reward you for your positive streaks; the sense of accomplishment can be addictive and can motivate you to keep going.

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

### **WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

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1. Continue working on the basics of your novel. Using the “Interests” and “My Locations” pages in your notebook, choose a few of the elements that fascinate you most. From there, begin formulating a one-page description of the world of your novel. Title this page “My World.” This doesn't have to be a specific place just yet; it can be a theme—for example, “The dark secrets inside the NSA” or “A journey to the outer planets.” Spend the page elaborating on your chosen theme. Pretend you are describing it to a friend who is eager to learn why it's so interesting to you.
2. Even if you haven't fully developed your story yet, interviewing people can help you grasp the world of your novel and can be an excellent way to inspire the creation of characters. Think of someone you might interview now. For example, you want to write about a patient in a psychiatric hospital. You've read a lot about the specific mental health issues that interest you, you have the bare bones of a plot, and you know a bit about psychiatric hospitals from watching television shows, but you lack the real, firsthand knowledge you'd need to describe what it's like being inside one.



- Write a list of names of ideal interview subjects.
- Begin asking friends and family and other contacts if they know anyone who can talk to you.
- Explore alternative connections. Using the example above, you might research local hospitals in your area and call them to see what their policies are regarding visitors. Ask if they can put you in touch with a doctor or nurse who might give you an interview. You may have to ask a few times, especially as a beginning writer, but don't give up.
- Come up with a list of topics you hope to discuss with an interview subject, and formulate some open-ended questions you might have for them.

### FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

1. You may have done all the research you need to get started on your novel, but interviewing subjects can strengthen characterization and clarify your plot at any stage of your writing. Perhaps you've reached a scene in which your characters are fleeing for their lives. They've arrived at a marina and have stolen a boat. You hadn't planned for this—your characters simply did it. This can happen when you're really in the zone with your writing. It may suddenly seem natural for your characters to do something you hadn't planned for. Only now you're describing a situation you know little or nothing about. Next time you come to a place in your writing where you have to research a subject you weren't expecting to tackle, take some time to make it formal.
  - Make a personal contact. Using the example above, ask friends and family whether they know any sailors. Using the example above, visit a local shipyard, if possible, or find someone who has been to one recently.
  - Develop a list of topics you'd like to discuss with an interview subject.



**T**HIS CHAPTER COVERS the basics of different outline procedures and introduces David's preferred way of planning out his novels.

### FINDING YOUR PLANNING PROCESS

Writers like to say that there are two types of people: those who outline, and those who don't. The first group—called “plotters”—will usually outline every step of their novel before they even begin writing. The second group—“pantsers,” so named because they fly by the seat of their pants—tend to simply start writing. Of course, there is a huge middle area between these two ends of the spectrum, and it will probably take some trial and error to find where you feel most comfortable. This middle area is where David operates. He uses two notebooks for his outlining. In the first notebook, he creates a broad, sweeping outline that is somewhat basic. He identifies the story's big events and comes up with an overarching storyline. Then he turns to his second notebook in which he lays out a careful chapter-by-chapter outline of his story. Then he gets down to writing, going back to his outline only when he needs to.

While David is writing, he creates “mini outlines.” These are essentially bullet points of things that he wants to accomplish in each scene or chapter. These can be big or small things, but they're the essential goals he has for each scene (having two people learn a crucial piece of information, or having one character meet another). These bullet points become apparent to him—and are subject to refinement—as he goes along. Each one of these points is a piece of a puzzle that will make up the finished product of your novel, and so it's helpful to think of them as being subject to rearrangement. You may have to move things around to get the final picture you desire.

“Every page you write, you learn something about the story you want to tell.”

“It's this intricate puzzle you're having to put together. The great thing for all of you is that you can do it any way you want.”



## LOCKING DOWN A CENTRAL CONFLICT

Every story has a central conflict, or what writers call a major dramatic question. It will be tied intimately to your story's stakes. Whenever a writer talks about the stakes of a story, they're referring to what's on the line for your characters. It's the specific description of what is motivating them. Stakes are the driving force in any story, and they can be anything you want—solving a murder, apprehending a suspect on the run, falling in love—but they must feel deeply important for your main character. Maybe the stakes are personal: In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White is desperate to ensure his family's financial security after receiving a terminal cancer diagnosis, and so he turns to making and selling meth. In many thrillers, the stakes tend to be high: Your main character may be motivated to stop a criminal from killing vast numbers of people, striking terror into an entire country, devastating a government, or precipitating an economic collapse. Consider the following books to get a sense of the kind of stakes characters most often deal with in this genre:

### ***The Bourne Identity* (1980)**

By Robert Ludlum

Jason Bourne wakes up on a boat with retrograde amnesia. He must piece together who he is in order to explain his remarkable skill set—why he speaks so many languages and knows elaborate survival techniques—and why so many people are trying to kill him. Bourne's stakes are personal: He wants to survive, and in order to do that, he needs to know who he was.

### ***Absolute Power* (1996)**

By David Baldacci

When burglar Luther Whitney stumbles into a scene where the U.S. Secret Service kills an innocent woman while the president looks on, Whitney becomes determined to reveal the truth. Whitney's stakes are personal (to clear his own name), but they soon become about a much larger sense of justice: making sure the president doesn't have absolute power.



***The Hunt for Red October (1984)***

By Tom Clancy

Former marine and history professor Jack Ryan gives top-secret intelligence to the CIA and persuades them to take a new Russian submarine threat seriously. Unless the Americans can develop technology to detect the new submarine, the Russians could get close enough to the U.S. to launch a nuclear bomb at her shores. Ryan's stakes are patriotic: He is motivated to save the country.

***Jurassic Park (1990)***

By Michael Crichton

Paleontologist Alan Grant finds himself on an island with dinosaurs that were created by genetic cloning. When the dinosaurs break free of their cages, Grant must help the park owner's grandchildren survive a prehistoric dystopia. Grant's stakes start as personal—his own survival and that of the two children he finds in his care—though they steadily become larger: Ultimately Grant must stop the dinosaurs from getting off the island, which could endanger the entire world.

***Inferno (2013)***

By Dan Brown

Robert Langdon must prevent the spread of a manufactured virus that will kill most of the world's population. Langdon's stakes are the highest: He must fight for the survival of all humanity.

Your stakes will be tied to your major dramatic question. This will be the most important question that your reader will want you to answer, and you'll want to keep them guessing about the answer for the majority of the novel. It's a good idea to introduce this problem/question at your novel's outset: For example, *Silence of the Lambs* (1988) by Thomas Harris opens with Special Agent Jack Crawford ordering FBI trainee Clarice Starling to interview Hannibal Lecter. They are hoping to find out who is killing and skinning women. The story's major dramatic question is introduced right away: Will Clarice catch the killer before he kills again? This question is the central focus of the events of the novel and does not get resolved until the very end. It's best to know your major dramatic question as you begin working on an outline.



David has an abundance of advice for outlining, so consider these tips when you're getting down to work:

**Outlines can be any length and any level of detail.**

Sometimes you'll start describing an idea for a scene, get swept away with it, and then actually begin writing. Other times you'll just write a bunch of bullet points. Find what works for you.

**Don't force yourself to do everything at once.** Outlining is an evolutionary process that can change day-to-day. Go as far as you feel comfortable, then come back to it later—or don't!

**Don't force yourself to stick with one style.** Maybe you won't outline your first project, but you will outline later ones. Each novel may be different and each outline can be, too.

**Leave room for exploration.** Don't be afraid to go off on a tangent while writing an outline. Maybe an idea sparks in your mind and you feel the need to write out what will happen with it over the rest of the novel. You'll see an example of this when you look at David's outlines for *The Innocent* and *The Fix* (find PDFs of those outlines in the [Resources section](#)).

## DON'T TAKE YOUR OUTLINE AS GOSPEL

You may discover that once you're writing your novel, the ideas from your outline fall by the wayside because something else is emerging in the text. It's best to let this happen and not force yourself to be constrained by your outline. The organic growth that occurs in writing is often more natural and less contrived, and it will feel that way to the reader, too. It can also open exciting new avenues for your story, so experiment with finding a balance between writing the novel and outlining it.

If you'd like a solid template for outlining your novel, check out K.M. Weiland's book *Outlining Your Novel: Map Your Way to Success* (2011) and its invaluable companion *Outlining Your Novel Workbook: Step-by-Step Exercises for Planning Your Best Book* (2014). Weiland has also created [digital software](#) for the workbook, which includes the workbook contents as well as tools for building settings and characters.



## CRAFTING SCENES

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A scene is a section of a story where characters typically engage in action or dialogue. It may also be made up of a character's thoughts in a certain place or about specific things. Most writers can intuitively grasp where a scene begins and ends, but it's a good idea to have a technical grasp as well. In a good scene, the emotional charge will change. If a character is excited to meet someone at the start of the scene, the scene can end when your character is disappointed, confused, alarmed, or even more excited—in short, it will end when their excitement has transformed into something else. Most chapters can be broken down into one or more scenes.

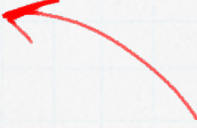
One thing outlining teaches you is that sometimes your first idea isn't the best one; rather, it was a launch point to get you to something better. Here are some questions to consider when brainstorming scenes:

**Is this cliché?** Often our first ideas are just the most obvious solutions. Interest and nuance come from going back to story elements and striving to make them original and fresh.

**Is it plausible?** Sometimes a scene seems like a good idea in an outline, but when you're actually writing it, you realize that it's impossible or your characters aren't ready to handle this event. While you're outlining, make sure that your characters have some preparation for dealing with every big obstacle they face.

**How can I deliver a surprise?** Writers are often so focused on getting their characters from point A to point B that they forget to plan for surprises and twists.

**Am I going against my instincts?** Maybe it only makes sense that your characters would steal that boat and race out of the harbor while your villain is pursuing them, but something is telling you to linger in the scene. Trust those instincts, and take time to explore them. Always write a page or two, following that quiet voice in your head to see where it leads.



"The small scenes make great novels."



## ASSIGNMENTS

### WRITING EXERCISES

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Title a page in your notebook “Outline,” and begin creating an outline based on the work you’ve done so far. Use the questions below to help shape your outline.

- How do you introduce the world of your novel?
- Who are your heroes, and how do you want to introduce them? What is the central conflict for your main character?
- What are the obstacles that will prevent your main character from reaching their goal?
- What is the ending of your novel? You may not know it now, but write down some general thoughts anyway (i.e., “I want the hero to survive a nuclear blast”).
- Who are your secondary characters? They may emerge as you write. You don’t have to develop them fully here, but make notes of who they are (i.e., “security guard, helpful woman on the subway”).
- Are there any subplots?

### FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

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1. If you haven’t outlined your novel yet but would like to, use the exercise above, and do it now. If you have outlined, go through it and answer the following questions:
  - What is the central conflict of the story? (i.e., What is your novel’s major dramatic question?)
  - What is at stake for the protagonist of the novel?
  - Does the pressure on the main characters grow more intense as the story progresses?
  - Where does it lag?



Tweak your outline so that your central conflict is clear to the reader, carries through the entire novel, and remains critical for the protagonist right up to the end.

2. The middle of a novel, usually made up of a series of obstacles your characters must overcome to reach the climax, is traditionally the hardest part to get through. It's where most writers get lost—even if they've outlined. If you're finding yourself struggling midway through your story, gather a set of index cards and write down a single plot point on each one (i.e., Jake busts the cartel. Jake learns that Ivan has betrayed him). If you have the space, you can post them all on a wall to make them easier to view and move around. Look over the cards, and try to see your novel overall. The purpose is to identify which points need strengthening and which may be superfluous, so consider the scenes and chapters one at a time and make sure they flow naturally and that the intensity escalates. Trust your instincts while doing this work: You may have taken a wrong turn somewhere, and this exercise can help you see where that might be.




**T**HIS CHAPTER COVERS specific writing techniques for thrillers—opening with a major dramatic scene, sustaining momentum with multitasking chapters, and compression techniques that will keep your story focused and tight.

## LEARN MORE

### WHAT'S YOUR BIG POP?

Traditionally, thrillers open by laying out their major dramatic question (see Chapter 5: Outlining). It's imperative to capture a reader's attention by raising a question that they want answered. You can open a story with a big event or you can build anticipation toward that event. David has done both many times. No matter which style you employ, at the very least, something interesting has to happen, and this is what David calls the Big Pop. Here are some things to remember about your opening chapter:

- The events should be out of the ordinary for your character.
- Your reader should feel grounded and able to understand what's happening. They may not know everything, but they have to know enough to comprehend the situation.
- You can mislead your reader, but don't confuse them. Nothing will make a reader put a book down faster than feeling lost.

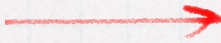


"The Big Pop is how the novel is going to open. If you don't get that right, it doesn't matter what else you write after that, because nobody is going to finish reading it."



- As a touchstone chapter, it may be subject to change or refinement later, so keep coming back to it throughout the writing of the book.
- Keep the writing and storytelling tight: Everything on the page should be there for a reason.

Sometimes novels start with a slow burn. You may need more space to introduce various characters or your world before you can really get into the suspense. In this case, use a prologue to introduce action. Usually this type of introduction will show a scene from just before the novel's climax or ending. It can also refer back to a past scene that sets the story in motion. It hints at the major dramatic question, but most importantly, it promises the reader that you will eventually reach a critical action scene. Once the reader is hooked, they will become more invested in the slow burn sections.



## GIVING YOUR STORY MOMENTUM

“When you’ve got a chapter that’s two or three or four pages long, you have to hit your mark with every word.”

You know when you’re reading a great book and can’t put it down no matter how late it gets or how tired you are? That’s the result of momentum, or the sense that you can’t wait to see what happens next. Momentum is generally created when you answer questions your readers are curious to know and then create even bigger questions to replace the previous ones. You can control and sustain momentum with some basic tools:

**Keep scenes and chapters short.** Each chapter contains information that either fulfills a previous question you raised for the reader or introduces a new one. A classic example from crime fiction: “Will this serial killer strike again?” becomes “He struck again—now how many *more* people will he kill?” David keeps his chapters short—between three to five pages.

**Have one scene do multiple things.** David introduces John Puller in *Zero Day* (2011) by showing him moving through a security checkpoint, and he manages to reveal an awful lot in a short space: that Puller’s father was renowned, that Puller was injured in combat, and that he’s a blunt conversationalist and potentially a stickler for protocol and detail.



**Make sure each chapter has a purpose that ties in to the bigger story.** Don't fluff up the novel with irrelevant content.

**Continue to raise new questions for the reader.** Make sure your new questions are bigger and more important than the previous ones.

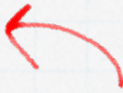
In a thriller, people want to be on the edge of their seat the whole time, and this requires narrative focus. Don't meander too far from your main storyline—that is, from scenes and dialogue that develop your stakes. In order to keep your chapters short and focused, you may need to compress them. These editing tools can help you tighten up your prose and keep your plot rolling:

**Open in the middle of a scene.** Take the chapter you just wrote, and start at the most important moment. Cut out everything that came before that, and, if you need to keep any information from your cuts, weave them into the more exciting part of the scene.

**Get rid of excess words.** Go through your writing and see how many words you can cut while keeping the original feel of your work. (Hint: adverbs—words like *gently* or *beautifully* that usually end in “-ly” and modify verbs or adjectives—are a good place to start.)

**Not everything has to be elaborated upon.** Beware of places where you've given too much description, especially of a static object. Do you need to spend two whole paragraphs describing a building that's not essential to the plot? One powerful detail will often do the trick.

**Compress your dialogue.** Making people seem real on the page often means giving them shorter sentences. Most people are naturally economical speakers and will tend to say “I'll go” instead of “Yes, I will go.”

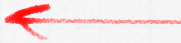


“My mantra is: When you read one of my books, do not skim, because every word in there, every line that I write, every paragraph that's in the book means something.”

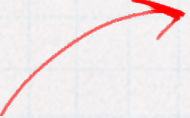


## BLENDING STORYTELLING ELEMENTS

Internal monologues are those sections of text where you see a character's thoughts and feelings while they are happening. They're incredibly useful for exposing a character's motivations, fears, and innermost beliefs. They can also reveal a lot about the people and places around the character, so they tend to do double (or triple) duty. You can do this in first person ("I felt the heat from the brush fire and it made me think of Samantha, alone in the cabin.") or third person ("Jacob felt the heat from the brush fire and he thought of Samantha. She was alone in the cabin.") Internal monologue is a type of exposition, which is any time the writer or the main character describes events and experiences. Remember to practice variety in your writing. Blend scenes of internal monologue with action sequences and dialogue so that you're never using too much of any one thing. This keeps things interesting for your reader.



"You're the writer, so you make your own rules about how you want to construct a chapter or a story. But I will try to put some... balance in there, too."



## CONSTRUCTING COMPELLING SCENES

"There can't just be one reason for the scene. There's got to be more than that."

Driving the plot forward, conveying information, and deepening a character's development are the three most critical jobs that a thriller scene can do. Each chapter you write should make use of at least one of these tools, and preferably more than one. Make your scenes multitask. If your scene is getting sloppy or wandering off into strange territory, go back to the bullet points from the mini outlines you learned about in Chapter 5: Outlining. Come up with concrete bullet points for your scene. To keep your novel focused and on track, you should have a clear objective with every scene you write.



## ASSIGNMENTS:

### WRITING EXERCISES

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Write an opening scene, using the questions mentioned in the Learn More section above. As you write, be aware of any places where you want to keep writing more. Follow your instincts. You are in the early stages of creating a novel, so get down all the inspiration you can. You can always go back and shorten things later.

### WRITING EXERCISES AND FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

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Take a look at your opening chapter, or go to the assignment above and take a look at the opening scene you wrote. Does it have a Big Pop? If not, add one now using the techniques from this chapter. Either write a prologue (or outline one) or change your opening scene so that it has more power to capture the reader's interest. Think big here. As David says, your first chapter is almost more important than your last.

### FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

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This exercise will help with story compression. Pull five scenes at random from your novel-in-progress, and answer this question for each one: What are my goals for this scene? Make a list of goals for each one. These goals can be major or minor—for example, introducing a sidekick or learning a detail about your protagonist's past. Now try to add one more goal to each list so that each of your scenes is really multitasking. Not every scene has to have a dual purpose, but most of them will.

Select a few scenes from your work-in-progress and apply some of the compression techniques above, paying particular attention to cutting excess language.



**D**AVID SHARES TECHNIQUES for writing suspense—pacing, misdirection, cliffhangers, and clues—and discusses the way that mystery plays a role in his novels.

"All thrillers have a sense of mystery."



## LEARN MORE

### BUILDING A MYSTERY

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A sense of mystery comes about when your characters need to find something out and they begin following clues. As you saw in Chapter 1: Introduction, mystery characters know just as much as the reader does. They are hunting for information and trying to explain things like, "Who killed that woman?" or "Why did that senator disappear?" David considers himself a mystery/thriller writer, and his books are great examples of the way that action and investigation can work brilliantly together.

### START WITH A LOSS, END WITH A PAYBACK

---

Every novel will introduce its central conflict—or major dramatic question—early on. David likes to open his novels with immediate tension; in particular, he likes to open with a loss. When a character loses something, the reader assumes that the character will want revenge, and they wonder how that will happen. For example, at the beginning of *Memory Man* (2015), Amos Decker learns that someone has confessed to murdering his family. Decker wants the murderer to be punished, but that may not be possible. The major dramatic question is, "Will Amos find



justice for the person who killed his family?” David always finishes with payback, so *Memory Man* (2015) reaches its climax when the major dramatic question is answered.

→  
“You want to have readers saying, ‘I never saw that one coming.’”

As a suspense writer, you must always be one step ahead of your reader while subtly guiding their guesses about what’s coming down the pike. When you lead your reader down a false alley, this is called misdirection, which is a useful tool of suspense. There are a few ways to achieve this:

**Red herrings** make people draw false conclusions about a situation.

**Plot twists** occur when something unexpected happens in your storyline.

Like a magician’s sleight of hand, misdirection relies on where you focus your reader’s attention. At the beginning of *The Fix* (2017), a man and a woman are killed in front of FBI headquarters. David spends time focusing on the woman as a potential threat in the scene, but it’s the man who takes out a gun and shoots her, then himself. By misdirecting the reader to be wary of the woman instead of the real danger, David catches the audience off guard.

“When you say you want to build tension and suspense, just throw those words out and focus on this word instead: *anticipation.*”

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CLUES AND TOOLS OF SUSPENSE

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Once you’ve raised your major dramatic question in the reader’s mind, your characters will begin to search for the answer in the form of clues. These don’t have to be the traditional weapons of mystery fiction—interviews with suspects, say, or physical and forensic evidence. Clues should come naturally from your story’s world. They are bits of information that your characters will acquire and that will help them piece together a solution to the questions they want answered.

This is where the tools of suspense become so important. Keeping your reader engaged throughout the story requires incremental steps. You will essentially be controlling the leak of information to the reader, revealing just enough to keep them interested. Suspense writing carries an implicit promise. For example, when you show a nameless character being chased by an unknown assailant, the reader will



wonder: Who are these people? Why is one chasing the other? Will this character get caught? The reader assumes that you will answer these questions. You do not have to answer them right away, but if you wait too long, the reader will lose faith in you. It's as if you've broken a promise. While you're crafting a story, you must scrupulously identify every promise you make to your reader, and be sure to fulfill them all by the end of the book. Use the following suspense techniques to add more impact to your story:

**Create a delay.** Whenever you've created an expectation that something important will happen, you can delay it. Was the lawyer supposed to be at the courthouse now? Where is he? Why can't anyone get in touch with him? This creates instant worry.

**Add physical danger.** Nothing heightens tension like knowing that your character is about to get injured or die.

**Foreshadow big events.** When you foreshadow, you're preparing your reader for an important scene. People begin disappearing, then the lights go out, then you hear gunshots.... When your scene-setting lets the reader know that something bad is coming, you deepen their anticipation.

**Use misdirection.** In a way, this is the opposite of foreshadowing, because you are intentionally misleading your reader. Use red herrings or plot twists to keep your readers on their toes.

**Use multiple points of view.** Suspense can be created when the reader knows more than your characters do (see Chapter 1: Introduction). If your protagonist is heading to the Capitol Building, and your reader already knows that your villain is hiding out there, the reader will be filled with anticipation because they realize your hero is walking into a trap.

**Show a character's worries.** Readers will naturally get anxious when they realize how anxious your characters are.

**Add a ticking clock.** Time pressure in your story will always up the ante. Bonus points when that time pressure seems to make the characters' goals legitimately impossible, and your characters manage it anyway. You don't have



to use traditional devices here—the villain who rigs a bomb to explode at a given time, or a detective racing to catch a serial killer before he strikes again—instead, consider the details of your story, and find a natural way to develop time pressure in your setting. Just be aware that once you start a clock ticking, you’ve got to keep up the pace.

## OPTIMIZING THE PLACEMENT OF CLUES

“If you really are immersed in material and you’re living that story to the extent that you can without actually killing somebody, you will find that those clues and the placement of those clues come a lot more naturally and organically to you.”

When David talks about the placement of clues in your novel, he is talking about how you structure the moments that lead to a character’s discovery of an important piece of information. The word *clue* comes from the Greek word *clew*, which means a ball of thread, like the one Theseus used to find his way out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth. Think of your clue trail as a thread your characters must follow in order to reach their goal. How you structure these clues will depend on your own story and characters. Here are some general guidelines you can use to optimize the placement of clues throughout your novel:

**Start small.** Don’t try to outline a whole novel full of clues all at once. You’ll probably discover them as you go along.

**Trust your characters.** Focus on your character’s perceptions. Does something strike them as odd? Why? Let them guide you to clues and their solutions.

**Hide clues in plain sight.** You don’t want to tell your reader all the answers up front, but when they reach the end, they should be able to look back over the scope of the novel and see that the clues were there the whole time.

**Immerse yourself in the material.** Try to live out as many elements of your story as possible in order to find the natural placement of clues and details. Are your characters stalking someone in a museum? Go to a gallery, pretend to stalk your character, and see the world as they would see it. What jumps out at you? Are there any unusual features to the room or the people around you?

It’s useful to keep the storytelling principle called “Chekhov’s Gun” in mind when placing your clues, which reminds writers that all elements of a story should ultimately prove necessary. Chekhov put it this way: “If, in the first act, you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don’t put it



there.” Remember that every aspect of your story is a kind of promise to the reader that you should scrupulously fulfill by the end of the book.

## GET A GRASP ON YOUR PACING

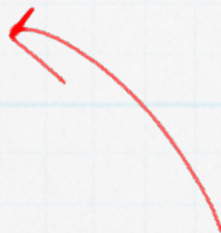
Pacing is how fast or slow the story seems to be moving for the reader. You can control this in two ways: First, narrative techniques can generate momentum on a page-by-page basis. Dialogue tends to speed things up, while narrative exposition tends to slow things down. The second way is with your story’s contents. A scene in which a killer is about to take down his victim is more interesting than a scene where your hero is idly eating his lunch. Any good novel needs a blend of both fast and slow pacing. Too much action or interest will wear a reader down, while too little will bore them, so it’s critical to find a balance. David suggests thinking of this movement as having a “roller-coaster” pattern—you bring the reader up (slowly but surely building anticipation) and then down (providing a big thrill). Here are a few practical ways to utilize his advice in your own work:

**Give your reader breaks.** It’s important to provide pauses and slower moments so that readers can catch their breath. There are a number of tools you can use to keep these moments engaging. Consider having your character recap the events they’ve been through. This not only provides a welcome rest, but it will keep details fresh in the reader’s mind. It’s very natural for characters to review their investigations and to look for new insights or new avenues to explore. Sometimes your characters can even take you in surprising directions.

**Amplify your thrills.** The intensity of thrilling moments should grow more and more as the story progresses; otherwise, you risk losing your reader. If a reader thinks they’ve already experienced the most exciting moments of the story, they’ll naturally lose interest.

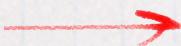
## USING CLIFFHANGERS TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

A cliffhanger is when a scene ends just before a climactic action. The scene itself has raised a question for the reader, and by withholding the outcome, you naturally drive the



“I bring you up to the top of the roller coaster, I let you sit up there for a little while, and then down you go.”

“It’s almost like you paused in midscene, and I love the effect that it has.”





reader forward. The term came from Thomas Hardy's novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), which ended with a character literally hanging from a cliff. Originally, a cliffhanger referred to a final, unresolved scene where a character's life was at stake, but today cliffhangers can be large or small. Most thriller writers end each chapter with a cliffhanger. They spend the chapter building interest and questions around a particular subject. At the end, they withhold vital information from the reader, thus propelling them to keep turning the pages.

## ASSIGNMENTS

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### WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write another chapter in your novel. This new chapter can be a continuation of your opening scene or something from the middle of your book. Just go with what you feel like writing today. Make sure to apply any of the tools from this chapter—misdirection, suspense, or cliffhangers.

### WRITING EXERCISES AND FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

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1. Go back to your opening chapter, the one with the Big Pop. How does it end? If it doesn't end on a cliffhanger, add one in now. The most common way to do this is simply to stop the action just before something is revealed (before they find out what's in the mysterious package, say) or before a final action takes place (the gun was fired, but who got shot?). Bear in mind that it is not always necessary to return to the scene in the very next chapter. In fact, you can tease your reader further by switching to another character's point of view or to another scene entirely. You're making a promise that you'll come back to that original scene and resolve the cliffhanger, but hopefully by that time, you'll have raised an even bigger question for your reader.
2. If you're outlining, go back to your page titled "Outline," and continue developing your story. In particular, pay attention to the thrilling moments. Spread them out through the story in an escalating way so that the early thrills have smaller stakes than the later ones. If you're having trouble doing that, you may have to create some larger thrills for your ending.



## FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

1. The chart below will help you get an overview of the clue structure of your novel. Go through your outline and your chapters and find all the clues you have so far. Remember, these don't have to be traditional mystery clues (alibis, forensic evidence); they can be whatever bits of information become available to your characters that lead them to important revelations. Use the chart to work out a chronology. Rearrange the clues as many times as you need to until they feel right.

<b>A. CLUES THAT YOUR CHARACTERS FIND</b>	<b>B. CLUES THAT YOUR CHARACTERS DON'T RECOGNIZE AS CLUES (I.E., HIDDEN CLUES)</b>
<b>C.</b>	<b>D.</b>



**2. Practice misdirection.** Focus on using subtlety and suggestion, and avoid confusing your reader. Choose a scene from your novel and apply the basic steps of misdirection listed here:

**Step 1:** Identify a piece of information that is not fully explained (i.e., “Who is that on the video feed?”). Uncertainty is key to keeping the reader’s interest, so you’re raising a question the reader wants answered.

**Step 2:** Suggest an explanation to the reader. This can happen all at once or build up slowly. Try to be subtle. Don’t simply tell the reader what’s going on; instead, let your characters draw conclusions or use suggestive language to point the reader to a certain conclusion without really saying it (i.e., The investigator thinks the face on the screen looks a lot like his partner, but that’s impossible. However, it sets him on a course of wondering if she’s been lying to him....).


**Step 3:** Reveal the truth. This may not happen right away. (Often, whole subplots are built around misdirection.) Go to the appropriate point later in your novel and show that your character made the wrong assumption. Also show any consequences this assumption has had. If you haven’t written that moment yet, write up a brief description in your notebook or some bullet points for how you will reveal this twist.



# CREATING COMPELLING CHARACTERS

**I**N THIS CHAPTER, David shares guidelines for creating well-rounded characters. He covers protagonists, sidekicks, and villains, and advises that each one should have real-life flaws and motivations, as well as plausible transformations over the course of the novel.

“Flaws in a character—it’s almost a misnomer to call them flaws. I just call them deepening character traits.”



## FLESH OUT YOUR CHARACTERS

Even though characters spring from your imagination, your reader will want them to feel like real people. Readers want to be able to care about your characters and to empathize with their situations. Use David’s tools for creating empathy:

**Give your characters flaws.** Perfect people can seem unreal and can drain tension right out of your story. Real people make mistakes. If you can make these conflicts intriguing, it will deepen your characters and will ultimately make them—and your story—more interesting.

**Give them baggage.** Everyone has a bad experience in their past that will affect their present. Don’t be afraid to dredge up a past mistake or trauma and explain it to the reader. It will help them understand why your characters act as they do. You don’t want to catalog every bad thing they’ve ever experienced, but focusing on the things that relate to their story now can grab and hold your reader’s interest. It can also drive your plot in interesting new directions.



**Know your characters' motivations.** Figure out what all your characters want, even your villains. You should do this early on—it's going to shape your whole story. Once you understand this, you'll be able to see the world through your characters' eyes and convey to the reader what each one sees and perceives.

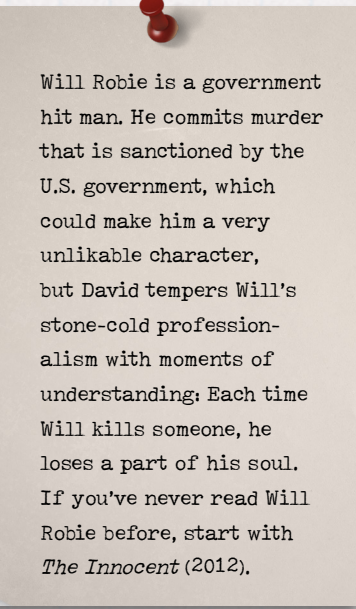
**Make character motivations believable.** Whatever a character's desires are, they should be credible. If your villain wants to blow up an entire law firm, the reader should come to understand the reasons behind it.

**Use real-world observation in developing your characters.** Even if your characters are robots in a lab, you'll still want readers to feel a connection to them somehow. David goes into the world and scrupulously observes people—what they do, how they move, what they look like, how they speak—and uses all the bits that interest him, grafting them onto each character he creates.

**Plan your character's nadir.** The “nadir” is the lowest point of the character's fortunes—when they've hit rock bottom. Ask yourself: What is the worst thing that could happen to this person? Make this punch count. Your reader should feel the depth of the character's loss.

One well-known tool to generate empathy is a technique called “save the cat.” Coined by Blake Snyder, the phrase refers to a scene in the movie *Alien* in which the character Ripley saves a cat. It conveys the principle that if you show a character doing something nice, no matter how trivial, you can win instant sympathy from an audience. It works even if the character is a hard-bitten criminal.

For more advice, pick up a copy of *Creating Characters: The Complete Guide to Populating Your Fiction* (2014) by the editors of *Writer's Digest*. It contains a wealth of tips for handling character creation and all of the other processes discussed in this chapter.



Will Robie is a government hit man. He commits murder that is sanctioned by the U.S. government, which could make him a very unlikable character, but David tempers Will's stone-cold professionalism with moments of understanding. Each time Will kills someone, he loses a part of his soul. If you've never read Will Robie before, start with *The Innocent* (2012).



## EXPECT YOUR CHARACTERS TO CHANGE

Even though you'll spend time creating your characters and understanding all of their motivations, characters will transform over the course of a novel (especially one packed with high tension). This is called a character arc. How characters transform will depend on who they are and the situations they face, so you've got to check in with them every step of the way. Consider the following guidelines while working with your character arcs:

**Change can be positive or negative.** Maybe your character starts out a brave hero and winds up wicked, or maybe your villain turns into a saint. Let your characters lead—they'll tell you where they want to end up.

**Not every change has to be overt.** Some characters grow stronger by holding their moral position against all odds. This may lead to a more subtle or internal transformation, while not much changes in their outward behavior.

**Every change in your character should have a corresponding reason.** Don't let your character go from apathetic to passionate without giving the reader a means of understanding why.

**The character's change does not have to be slow.** Sometimes a character's transformation happens abruptly because of a shocking event. This can even happen "offstage," or before a reader enters the storyline: David's character Amos Decker loses his whole family in *Memory Man* (2015), and his whole life changes in an instant.

**The change can be in the background.** In some novels, the plot is far more engaging than the character's transformation. A lot of characters change very slowly over the course of many novels, while their plots serve to keep the reader interested. James Bond is a classic example of this.

If you want to learn more about character arcs for your stories, check out *Creating Character Arcs* (2016) by K.M. Weiland. This book and its accompanying workbook offer an incredibly useful, practical guideline for plotting how your story and characters affect one another.

"If you're going to put a character into a thriller where lots of crazy things are happening, how in the world can you expect the character not to be changed by the end of the novel?"

"I built up better skills and talent as a writer because I had multiple characters I had to pay attention to."



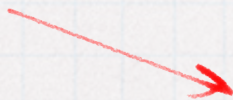
## FLESH OUT YOUR SIDEKICKS

Sidekicks serve numerous important functions in a novel, but their primary purpose is to help your main character. Sidekicks usually bring some sort of alternate skill set to the table. If your protagonist is a private detective who needs access to police records, then you might give him a sidekick who works for the cops. Sidekicks can also provide comic relief, an alternate perspective, and a sounding board for your protagonist. Just remember that if you give sidekicks a romantic component, the longer you can delay the consummation of their attraction, the more tension and interest you'll get from the situation. Sometimes sidekicks can actually *dislike* your hero. In other cases, they can be downright confrontational and unsupportive, showing “tough love” to kick your hero when he needs it or simply acting as another obstacle the hero must overcome. No matter what type of sidekick you create, be sure to give them the same depth of character as you give to your hero. If you do this correctly, the sidekick's story can take on a life of its own and will add another layer of interest to keep your reader hooked.

## FLESH OUT YOUR VILLAINS

You should give your villains just as much thought as you do your protagonists. Are they bullies or assassins or simply self-serving people? Whoever they are, they should have the same complex personalities and believable motivations as your other characters. Just “being psycho” is a lazy explanation, so create a backstory for them and work out how they reached their current state. You don't have to include their entire history in your novel, but you should provide enough to make the characters believable. Sometimes villains are more interesting than other characters because life has made them sharper, harder, or more desperate. In some cases, their insanity makes them powerfully frightening or compelling—think of Hannibal Lecter, who first appears in *Red Dragon* (1981), emerges as a major character in *Silence of the Lambs* (1988), and finally gets his own novel in *Hannibal* (1999). A reader may never fully understand why Lecter kills people, but he is a complete character with a history, motivations, and a distinct personality. In his incredibly useful screenwriting guide *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997), Robert McKee argues

“I like people who are in the gray areas—where good people do bad things sometimes for the wrong reasons and bad people, who often do really bad things, can do something good every once in a while.”



Amos Decker of the *Memory Man* series has a sidekick in Alexandra Jamison. As a result of an NFL injury to his brain, Amos suffers from hyperthymesia, which means he can recall his past in almost perfect detail. He forgets nothing, which helps him with investigations, but the skill is also a curse since he can never seem to forget the memory of his murdered family. Throughout the series, Jamison is one of the few people who comes to understand Decker's unique problems.



that all humans will choose to do what they consider the right thing—as they see it. In order for your villain to feel authentic, you yourself must understand why they see the world as they do. How did they reach the point where they believe that killing someone, or terrorizing a whole population, is the right thing to do? Use your imagination and give them a belief system that’s as real as your hero’s.

## ASSIGNMENTS

### WRITING EXERCISES

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1. If you haven’t done so already, create a main character for your novel. If you’d like, go back to the “My World” page in your notebook, and imagine a character who is part of that world. For example, are you writing about outer space? Create an astronaut. Take David’s recommendation and don’t borrow people wholesale from real life. Instead, let your character become a fusion of various people who interest you. Give him or her a name, and answer the following questions to begin creating their backstory:
  - How old are they, and what do they look like?
  - What is their average mood like?
  - How do they feel about the opinions of others?
  - What do they think about where they grew up and went to school?
  - What are their parents like? Their siblings?
  - How do they feel about marriage?
  - What’s their favorite thing to do?
  - What do they hate doing?
  - What was their most passionate love?
  - What is their health like?
  - What was their most traumatic moment in life?
  - What matters to them more than anything in the world?
  - Who are their heroes?

Create similar pages in your journal for sidekicks and villains. Answer the questions for each character.



2. Write a one-page monologue from your main character's point of view. Have them talk about their baggage—any unpleasant or defining past events that shape their behavior in some way today. Title this page “Baggage.” Let them tell you about themselves so you can begin to hear their voice on the page. How do they talk?
3. Once you've developed your characters above, write a one-page description of each of them. Try not to write a flat description—picture the character in motion, in the middle of a scene, or talking to someone else. Use any of the following techniques to enhance your description, and remember the tools you learned above for creating empathy.
  - Choose a significant event—good or bad—from your character's past, and use it to introduce them. This event should be big enough to affect their everyday life today. What are the psychological or physical repercussions?
  - Introduce your character through a single unusual feature—for example, a missing leg, a mysterious nickname, or a strange tattoo. How did they get it? What's their history with it? Imagine that someone else is learning about this feature. How does your character feel about exposing or talking about it?
  - Identify a significant character trait, and write down the ways it can be expressed. Then choose one of those ways, and build a scene from it. For example, if your character is profoundly shy, create a scene where they have to talk to someone who intimidates them.
  - Choose a favorite space for your character, and show them in that place. It can even give you insights to briefly describe their house, kitchen, bedroom, office, car, etc. Now show something bad happening to that space—what is the character's reaction?
4. Go to a café or other public place where you can observe people. Title a page in your notebook “My Character Traits,” and begin making a list of qualities you'd like to use in your stories. This can be for different characters or all for the same person—just write what appeals to or interests you. Embellish this list with observations from daily life, but include any inspirations that



come from other places—television, books, movies, your imagination. Don't forget to use your “writer's prism.” Continue going back to this list throughout the novel.

5. Next time you're in a public place, use your writer's prism, and come up with stories for the strangers around you. Why are they there? Have fun with this exercise, and write down your thoughts as soon as you can.
6. For help in developing the nuances of villains, choose one of the characters below—or create one of your own—and write a page of monologue from their point of view. Try to understand their motivations, and let them explain themselves.
  - A lawyer who has just helped evict an elderly woman from her lifelong home.
  - A reckless teenager who has stolen his father's gun.
  - A police officer who has shot a man on his porch.
  - A corporate executive who has just raised the cost of a lifesaving drug.
  - A senator who has accepted a huge bribe.
  - A prison guard who has nearly beat an inmate to death.

## FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

1. Consider your main character, and answer the question: What is the worst thing that can happen to him/her? Then go further, and ask: How can I make it even worse? Write down the answers in your notebook. This is a brainstorming session, so write freely and try out numerous ideas.
2. Some novels abound with secondary characters (those who are not the main characters). If yours has more than a few secondaries, it's a good idea to give each character at least one distinctive trait. This will help your reader place them if the character makes more than one appearance in the book. It's a sort of writerly courtesy to the reader. If your former politician has a pony named Whiskey who wanders freely through his house, give Whiskey a brief scene. Then refer back to it the next time we meet the politician. Go through your novel, and



try giving an embellishment to a secondary character. For example:

- An odd item of clothing or a physical quirk, like a strange bow tie or unusually colored hair.
- An interesting name.
- An odd verbal style. You probably don't want to go with a full accent, but one or two small verbal tics can be a helpful reminder.
- Their last appearance. Sometimes it's easiest just to remind the reader of where we last met the character, such as "the woman from the airport newsstand."

The next time this character shows up in your story, refer back—very briefly—to their quirk.

**3.** First meetings are critical. How do your characters first appear to a reader? Go to the places in your novel where you first introduce your main character, sidekick, and villain. Are you satisfied with how you've created them on the page? If not, incorporate some of the following techniques for sharpening your characterization:

- Choose a major character trait, and reveal it through action instead of description. For example, your protagonist is a mathematical genius. Show them making a quick calculation that startles a fellow passenger on a train.
- Draw out your description over the course of a few pages or a whole chapter. Instead of giving everything at once, intersperse details while something else is going on—a conversation, for example.
- Describe your character from another person's—or a few other people's—point of view. You can get a very well-rounded perspective by shifting through points of view as different people interact with your character. For example, your FBI agent is entering his office. Show what the security guard thinks of him, then what a fellow agent thinks of him, then what his boss thinks of him, etc. Try to contrast the various perspectives, but make sure each one is true.
- Put your character in a completely unfamiliar situation. Be sure this is actually a challenging one. Make it clear to the reader why it's challenging—and what would be normal for your character.



**D**AVID OFFERS ADVICE for perfecting dialogue: Understand your characters and their immediate situations, listen to real-world dialogue, and keep your characters' jargon under control.

"You have to sit back and say, 'What is the emotional sequence of this scene?'"

### KNOW THE EMOTIONAL CONTEXT

Before writing dialogue, it's good to have two things clear in your mind. First, make sure you know your character's current emotional situation. An angry character from one chapter might still be angry in the next one—or has something happened to soften them up? Imagine you are that character, and try to feel what they have just been through. What are they thinking? Planning? What will their response be to the next obstacle in the story? You don't have to go easy on your characters—push them to their limits—but you should strive for continuity in describing their behavior. Second, it's important to know your specific plot goals for the scene. Are you trying to convey some information or have your character recover from a brush with danger? Whatever it is, write it down as a bullet point, and make sure you keep that the focus of your scene.

"My rule of thumb with dialogue is brevity."

### COMPRESS YOUR DIALOGUE

You should keep dialogue economical in the same way you do with your prose (see Chapter 6: Constructing Chapters). Unless your character is naturally verbose, tighten up his or her language, conveying only the information that will deepen the character or move the story forward. Here are some suggestions for compressing your dialogue:



**Use sentence fragments.** “Of course” works just as well as “Of course I’ll come with you to the meeting.”

**Avoid fillers.** Filler words like “Um” and “Well” may occasionally give a realistic tone to your characters’ speech, but it’s best to use them sparingly.

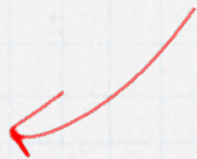
**Avoid using names.** People don’t usually call each other by name unless they’re meeting formally or crying for help, so lose those places in casual dialogue where someone says, “Yes, Sean, I’d like to join the sniper on the roof.”

**Cut repetitive phrases.** Scan through dialogue carefully, and look for places where your characters have said the same thing twice or where they are basically repeating themselves. It may seem natural—people rehash things in conversation all the time—but it can slow down your momentum.

**Avoid pontificating.** When characters start to get preachy—telling their sidekicks, for example, about the political motives for taking down that rogue CIA cell and how this corruption damages every facet of government and how this will ultimately save the whole country and... well, you get the picture. Pontificating tends to drag on and bore your readers.

**Use stage directions.** This is when you show the reader a character’s action or body language during dialogue: “‘No,’ she said, *clenching her hands into fists.*” This conveys your character’s anger without them having to say it.

“This is the critical time where you as a writer need to be a student of humanity.”



## STUDY PEOPLE

Writing authentic dialogue means understanding who your characters are. If you know them well enough, you’ll know how they speak and what kind of reactions they’ll have to things. David recommends going into the world and consciously listening to the way people talk in various circumstances, then practice duplicating what you’ve heard by writing it on the page. At first, it will probably take a lot of revising to do this well, but as you get a feel for your characters, it should become natural. Read your dialogue on the page, and keep going back to it, editing as you need to. Practice reading it out loud. (This can make a big difference.) Most importantly, be sure that it sounds



like your characters. So ask yourself: Is this really how they speak? Would they really say these things in this moment? And remember to stick to your goal for the conversation.

## MAKING USE OF SHORTHAND

→  
 “The last thing you want to do is lose the reader because you’re using all these idioms and colloquial terms they may not know because you want to be really cool.”

Every character in your novel will have their own way of speaking, but when that language gets technical—when your characters talk in shorthand about a specialized field (weaponry, legal or medical terminology, computer coding, investment banking, etc.)—you may wind up confusing your reader. A good rule of thumb is that if you had to research the way your character speaks, then chances are your reader will have to learn it, too. At the same time, you don’t want to have to explain everything—not only is it tedious, but it can slow your momentum.

David’s advice for using shorthand:

**Have one character be an expert and one character be uninformed.** The expert character can speak at a technical level, and the uninformed one can stop them, asking questions for clarification. Your readers will appreciate it.

**Assume the intelligence of your reader.** Don’t dumb things down and risk insulting your readers. Try to find a balance between using technical terms and explaining them.

**It’s okay to have a character be confused by things.** In David’s Case Study from *The Last Mile* (see the excerpt on page 56), Davenport and Bogart are both confused by the highly technical football discussion between Decker and Tommy. Most readers will identify with their confusion, but they will also understand that it’s as if Decker and Tommy are speaking a kind of code and bonding over football, which was the point of their conversation.

**Use authentic shorthand.** Does your character call a gun a “piece” or a “Glock”? Whatever it is, be authentic and consistent in how your characters speak.

**Avoid info dumping.** Revealing information to the reader is one of the three most critical jobs that a thriller scene should do (see Chapter 6: Constructing Chapters), so it’s important to learn the skills needed to reveal that



information. Beginning writers tend to drop large chunks of information onto the page all at once. This is called info dumping, and not only does it bore readers, but it stops the momentum cold. You want to make your information feel natural and interesting. These tips will help you do that.

**Have your characters discover the information.** You might want to be expository, telling the reader directly why the death of that senator will have repercussions all the way to Bangkok, but it will feel much more natural if your characters learn the information on their own.

**Use dialogue.** Perhaps your characters already know the information. Write a brief conversation where they discuss it to get the reader up to speed.

**Spread it out.** Maybe that connection between the senator and a CIA operative in Thailand is terribly convoluted. Break the information into smaller chunks, and let your characters struggle to uncover it all over the course of a chapter or several chapters. Information-gathering can be a great obstacle for your characters.

**Make sure the information is necessary.** Continue to go back over all of your information reveals, testing how relevant they are to your major dramatic question (see Chapter 5: Outlining). Something that may seem incredibly interesting in the moment might turn out to be irrelevant later.



[EXCERPT]

## **THE LAST MILE**

David Baldacci

Decker said, “What’s your best running play?”

“We call it the firecracker. Fake the A-gap blast to the fullback, pitch to me on the left edge. I cut back to the B-gap and then make a stutter to clear the line and let the tight end do a cutback scrape on the backer, then I hit the corner and I’m gone. Always good for at least ten yards until the safety makes the tackle. We run it on third and long because the box ain’t stacked and the secondary’s playing cover-two soft thinking we’re gonna pass.”

“I didn’t understand a single word of that,” said a bemused Davenport.

“If it makes you feel any better, neither did I,” commented Bogart.

Decker glanced over at the other players running a formation. “So you obviously run the tight end on that side if his job is to scrape the backer.”

“Yep,” said Tommy. “Extra blocker.”

“Right, but he’s not being properly utilized.” He looked back at Tommy. “Okay, tell your coach to scratch the stutter. The blast would’ve frozen the interior lineman anyway, so don’t waste the time. And you want to hit the B-gap at speed. You let the left tackle crash down to seal the edge, the *guard* comes around to do the scrape on the backer, that allows the tight end to release, and you follow his butt down the field. *He* engages the safety with his left shoulder if the guy comes up and tries to make a play, and forces him to the outside while you push off hard to the inside. If the corner’s in soft cover two he probably will have already committed to the outside edge because of the pitch, and you’ll have a receiver on him blocking, so you don’t have to worry much about him. If you’ve got decent wheels, you’re home free down the seam for a lot more than ten yards. Maybe end zone if you’re fast enough to beat the angle the other safety takes.”

Tommy broke into a broad grin. “Damn, man, thanks.”

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## ASSIGNMENTS

### WRITING EXERCISES

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1. Develop a dialogue between your protagonist and someone else. This can be a sidekick, a friend, or a complete stranger. Choose one of the topics below or come up with your own, and have your characters discuss—and disagree—on the subject. This is an exercise to help you get to know your characters—what they think, how they express themselves. Write at least one page of dialogue.
  - That mysterious thump outside their cabin on the train.
  - The sex toys they found in the old couple's bedroom.
  - Countries that ban guns.
  - Transgender bathrooms.
  - The old ranch that seems abandoned from the outside.
2. On a page in your notebook titled “Shorthand,” begin making a list of all the technical terms that your characters might use, noting which ones might be confusing for a reader. Strategize ways to convey explanations for complicated information to the reader, using the tools from the Learn More sections above.
3. Put your protagonist (and sidekick, if you have one) into any of the following scenes, and see how they react. Try to create dialogue as well as exposition. Your character is:
  - Confronted by a desperate tourist who only speaks a foreign language.
  - Staring down the barrel of an assault rifle.
  - Being forced to walk through a museum to please someone else.
  - Trying to reason with someone smarter than them.
  - Trying to reason with someone less intelligent than them.
  - Opening a stinky package that may contain a body part.
  - Seeing the love of their life for the first time and making an absolute mess of it.



## FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

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Select a few chapters from your novel at random, and scan through them to determine if there is too much dialogue or too much exposition. To make this easier, print out your pages. Using two colored pens, circle dialogue in one color and exposition in another. Does one color dominate? If your section includes too much dialogue, see if you can break it up with an occasional paragraph of exposition. If you have too much exposition, insert brief passages of dialogue. Even short sections of dialogue in parentheses can lend balance to long passages of exposition. For an example of this, see any of Kate Atkinson's crime novels in the Jackson Brodie series, such as *When Will There Be Good News?* (2008). Breaking up exposition with parenthetical dialogue is one of Atkinson's signature moves.



**T**HIS CHAPTER COVERS David's tools for writing thrilling and believable action sequences. Credibility comes from understanding the real-life consequences of your action elements and then rendering them with clear description and sensory detail.

"Action sequences are... very visual. Readers are counting on you to tell them exactly what they're seeing."

## LEARN MORE

### CHOREOGRAPHING ACTION SCENES

Action can excite the reader by heightening the danger to your main characters. It can create movement and momentum. It can also show you just what a character is made of. David uses action scenes to deepen the character of Will Robie, his government hit man and the hero of his eponymous series. Robie is a loner, and he isn't much of a talker, so we learn about his unique career and his skill set by watching him in action. Whether they're loners or not, you can do the same for all your characters. Action should be a complementary part of any characterization.

### GIVE VERISIMILITUDE TO YOUR ACTION SCENES

Action scenes require a dose of reality to avoid becoming cartoonish. If you've ever been in a fight, you know just how brutal and messy it can be. When people get shot, they don't usually saunter off happily. Credibility is especially important here, and that may require describing not only the actions themselves but their repercussions. Don't go out of your way to disgust your reader, but do give them a sense of the reality of violent conflict.

"As a writer, you have to understand the consequences of action scenes on flesh and bone."



**Do your research.** If your character gets harmed in a way you've never experienced, use the research techniques you learned in Chapter 4: Research Methods and Sources, Part 2, to find out what would most likely happen to them if they were maimed in a helicopter crash or forced to jump off of a roof.

**Show the consequences.** Don't just describe the way someone gets shot; tell the reader what happens as a result of it. How much blood do they lose? What level of pain do they experience? How would a bullet wound affect their mental state?

**Choreograph scenes.** David spends time considering the layout of important action scenes and then tries to re-create the scenes himself. He even goes through the motions as if he were his characters in order to get a feel for the reality.

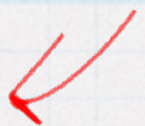
**Be visual.** The reader wants to feel like they can see the compelling details, so select them carefully and take time to describe them well.

**Don't forget reactions.** A punch can be so much more than a punch if it means something for your character: Let's say your hero gets attacked by someone who was like a father to him, and the blow breaks his spirit. You can't assume that the reader knows what that devastation feels like. Be sure to show your character's reaction.

**Use authentic emotion.** Make sure your characters have the appropriate reactions—for them—during and after the action. If your character was drop-kicked at a sporting event but he barely noticed because he was busy on Snapchat, that's okay, too. Maybe he's just that tough.

**Sometimes unreal things happen.** If you really need your main character to jump out of an airplane after he's been stabbed and shot, and you think he might actually be able to do it, let the characters around him react with the surprise and disbelief that your reader will likely be feeling.

“What does it feel like to be hit in the gut or have a kidney punch, or somebody smash you in the throat so you can't breathe?”





## FILL GAPS WITH SENSORY DETAILS

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You might think an action scene has to be a race, but don't be afraid to slow things down and allow the reader to savor the scene. Take a moment to describe a punch, or the sound of a bomb, or the way a building collapses. David uses this technique at the peak of his action scenes because it allows the reader to have a visceral experience. To give your descriptions more impact, you'll need to get a handle on sensory details. Consider what your characters see, hear, feel, smell, and taste in the midst of an action scene. Your hero can be stuck in an elevator, frantically searching for an escape, but when you add in the sound of screeching gears and the cries of fellow passengers, your reader will feel like they're there.

### ASSIGNMENTS

#### WRITING EXERCISES

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Think of your main character, and make a list of actions you associate with him or her. Write down the things that seem most natural for them. Write whatever comes to mind, no matter how trivial. This is an exploration of your main character and should help you imagine their physicality. When you're done, make a separate list of things that would be awkward or unlikely for that person. Ask yourself: What would make this person uncomfortable? For example, your protagonist is an army field surgeon. Natural actions for her might include washing hands, donning scrubs, bending over tables, running down a hospital corridor, shouting at nurses, subduing a wild patient. Uncomfortable actions might include lying to a patient, attacking someone physically, ignoring a cry for help.

Using the list above, create a scene in which your protagonist is doing something that is natural for them. Write at least one page showing them in action. Then find a way to include an uncomfortable action. How do they react?

On a page in your notebook titled "Scene Ideas," begin making a list of your favorite scenes from books and movies. Consider especially the ones that have stuck in your mind after many years—ones that terrified you as well as the ones you loved. Go over the details of each scene—reread or rewatch, if necessary—and pinpoint what was so compelling about it. It may surprise you. Use this list as inspiration for your own scenes.



Choose a scene from your page “Scene Ideas,” and analyze the ways it uses the suspense tools from this chapter. You may have to open the book or watch the movie again. While you’re going over it, identify the following:

- **The conflict:** What information were you desperate to know when the scene started?
- **The pacing:** When did the scene slow down? Speed up?
- **Misdirection:** Did you know what would happen? What was surprising about the scene?
- **Cliffhangers:** How did it end?

### FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

It’s common for people in high-stress situations to experience heightened awareness of their surroundings, so it won’t feel out of place for your characters to notice critical details. Write an action scene where a character experiences this sense of suspended time. What happens in this scene? What details do they notice?

If you have one, choose an action scene from your novel and scan through it. Does anything about it seem unrealistic? Make notes on any subjects you need to research to make the scene more credible. Look for any places where you can add in sensory details for a more visceral effect, and add them in now.



**T**HIS CHAPTER TAKES a look at the practical aspects of being a writer: finding time to write, discovering a writing process that works for you, and dealing with blocks that can arise at any point. David offers advice for staying on track.

### LEARN MORE

#### BALANCING A WRITING CAREER WITH YOUR OTHER CAREER

Most beginning writers will have to balance their writing with other responsibilities. David wrote for years while also practicing law and raising a family, so he has some solid advice for those who have to juggle their writing with numerous other, time-consuming demands.

##### **Set aside consistent blocks of time for writing.**

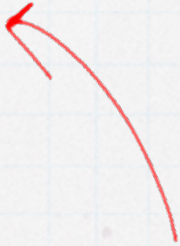
David wrote at night after a busy day, but he did it seven days a week. Your writing time can be early in the morning or late at night or on your lunch hour, but keep it consistent, and insist on prioritizing that time.

##### **Prepare for your writing session.**

Before you sit down to write, think of ideas, remind yourself of where you left off in the story, or make a mental plan for what you want to accomplish during that session.

##### **Set a goal for yourself.**

Some people strive to write 2,000 words a day. Others are more comfortable alternating between days spent reading, outlining, or researching. No matter what you choose, it's a good idea to give yourself daily goals.



"For me, the perfect place to write is in your head. If you're in the zone in your mind, you can write anywhere."



“Any writer who tells you they’ve never stumbled over a plot or had writer’s block is lying to you.”



### **Don't worry about space.**

Your writing area doesn't have to be perfect or private. If you're in the zone, you can write anywhere.

### **Immerse yourself in your material.**

When you finally sit down to write, try going back to the writing you did the day before. It's a good time to edit your previous day's work, and it'll get you back into the groove.

## **OVERCOMING WRITER'S BLOCK AND OTHER BARRIERS**

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No matter what kind of novel you're writing, chances are good that you'll struggle with its development at one point or another. You may lose interest. You may not know what to write next. You may be nervous about an upcoming scene. Procrastination can mask a number of issues, and you may start avoiding your writing for a while. These various writer's blocks are a normal part of the process and can happen to anyone. David recommends overcoming a barrier by taking a break from your work. This can be as short as a shower or as long as an afternoon hike. You may even need a full-fledged vacation. Whatever you can do to clear your head will help you return to your writing with a fresh energy and perspective. Alternately, a little pressure can also jump-start your motivation. If you don't have a publisher giving you a deadline, make one for yourself. Use a tracking tool like [Pacemaker](#), which allows you to set goals, strategize your work schedule, record your progress, and celebrate your successes. Or take part in National Novel Writing Month, or [NaNoWriMo](#), where participants try to complete an entire novel during the month of November, using the NaNoWriMo tracking tools and a vast online community of writers to challenge and support you.

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

### **WRITING EXERCISES**

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1. Now that you've begun writing your novel, keep going. But remember to return to your opening chapter. It's the most important one. On a page in your notebook, brainstorm your book's first sentence. What's the perfect opening for your book? What will grab the reader's interest and make them want to know more right away? Write as many first lines as you can until you find one that really thrills you.



2. Using a calendar of your choice, set up a writing schedule for the next four weeks. Determine what time of day you would like to write, how long you will spend writing, and what your approximate goals will be for each day. This can be general—for example, writing five pages per day. If you're more comfortable not having specific goals at this stage, focus instead on mapping out whatever research you may still have to develop.

## FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

1. Next time you encounter a writing block, use one of the following prompts to write a page in your notebook. Write freely without any concern for structure or fine language. Let your instincts lead the way, and provide as much or as little detail as you'd like. If one of the prompts sparks a new train of thought, follow that.
  - Describe exactly what happened in your body the last time you were terrified.
  - If you could perform a feat of extraordinary physical prowess, what would it be?
  - Has anyone brought you to the point of rage? If so, describe what they did, and come up with your ideal reaction.
  - What new technological development would really impress you?
  - Describe your ideal hobby and why you would like to do it.

Find a way to incorporate your responses into the next chapter you want to write.

2. Sometimes being blocked in your novel means you've lost touch with your protagonist. To get reacquainted, come up with a short backstory for your main character. Make sure this backstory is related somehow to the events in your novel. Write a page or more in your notebook about this backstory and see how it affects your character today.



# EDITING AND REVISING

**D**AVID SHARES the details of his own editing process and offers advice on editing both during and after the writing of your book.

## LEARN MORE

### THE BIG-PICTURE CONCEPTUAL EDIT

As with outlining, each writer will have their own preferred way of editing. David does a twofold editing process: The first edit happens while he is writing his novel. He continually goes back to look over his earlier chapters—particularly the first ones—to polish and adjust his work. The second, more substantial, edit happens when he’s done with the entire manuscript. He prints it out, uses red and blue pens, and “bloodies” the page. He moves chapters around, cuts and adds scenes, and deepens his characters. Approach your big edit with an open mind and honest perspective. You may find you have to eliminate a character, a whole subplot, or even change elements of your main storyline. As you read the whole book at once, new insights will come to you. Trust yourself, try not to be too precious about your work, and be willing to kill some of your darlings (even if that means doing away with some action scenes, a character you love, or even elements of your main storyline).

“If I can say much more powerfully in 5 words what I wrote in 10 words or 20 words in the novel, I’m going to do that.”

“This is my sweet spot...to get the manuscript to this point where I can put it down on that desk and just tear it apart.”

### THE NITTY-GRITTY LINE EDIT

After you’ve got the draft into the shape that you want it, take a closer look at the language on a line-by-line basis. This is called a line edit. You can usually get rid of at least 10 percent of your writing by simply trimming your sentences. Go back to the compression techniques you



learned in Chapter 6: Constructing Chapters, or pick up a copy of *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers, 2nd Edition* (2004) by professional editors Renni Browne and Dave King. It's a go-to resource for learning how to polish your work.

## THE CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER EDIT

→  
"There's going to be some going back and moving things around, cutting things out, adding things—that's all part of the process. Don't feel bad...you're spot-on with what you should be doing."

During his big edit, David asks himself, "What did I accomplish in this chapter?" He writes a short answer for each chapter and ends up with an outline-type overview of the whole novel. This is a good place to notice if a chapter is too busy (maybe it's trying to do too many things at once and needs to be broken up) or too dull (in which case it may need to be cut, or shortened, or mixed into another chapter). Doing an edit like this will help you control the pacing of your story (see Chapter 7: Pacing, Tension, and Suspense). And don't forget: Some chapters exist to set up following chapters, which in itself is a valid objective.

Once you're done with your edit, put the manuscript on a shelf for a few weeks or months. When you return to it, you'll bring a fresh perspective to it that will help you enormously in any future editing. And remember David's advice: Don't try to make everything perfect. Over-editing your novel can crush your original inspiration and damage the good work you've done. Take a look at David's notes in a sample edit of *The Innocent* (pages 68-74).

←  
"You have to let it go, because the world is waiting for the next book you have to write."



[SAMPLE EDIT]

**THE INNOCENT**

David Baldacci

TWO  
~~THREE~~~~Two minutes to go.~~

Robie rounds one final bend. He hears the guide talking, giving the memorized spiel and delivering it in a mysterious, ghost-like voice. Melodrama sells, thinks Robie. And in fact the uniqueness of the voice is vital to the plan tonight.

There is a right-angle turn coming up.

The tour is heading for it.

So is Robie, just from the opposite way.

The timing is so tight that ~~it will come down to one step off ruining everything~~. There is no margin of error here. He accepts that.

Robie counts the paces. He knows the guide is doing the same. They have even practiced the length of their strides, to get them perfectly choreographed. ~~This section of the passage has no lights. That was also planned.~~

Seven seconds later the guide, who is the same height and build as Robie, and wearing a cloak identical to his, rounds the bend a mere five paces ahead of his party. He holds a flashlight. That is the one thing Robie cannot duplicate. Both of his hands have to be free for obvious reasons.

The guide turns left and disappears into a cleft cut into the rock that leads into another room with another exit.

As soon as he sees this, Robie pivots putting his back to the group of men who will round the corner a few moments later. ~~He waits, counts the seconds.~~ One hand slips down to the recorder on his belt under the cloak and turns it on. The guide's dramatic voice booms out, continuing the tale that he momentarily halted to take the turn.

Robie did not like having his back to anyone, but there is no other way for the plan to work. The men have lights. They would see that he is not the guide. That he is not doing the talking. That he is wearing goggles. The voice drones on. He starts to walk forward.

~~The story of this underground world rolls on. This rock, that doorway, that bit of tortured history. That poor lost soul. The ghost that treads these passages in~~



sorrow. The voice tells it all. So many people died down here, says the guide's impressive voice.

There are more to come.

Five to be exact.

The men might ask a question. There is nothing Robie can do about that. That is what is known in the trade as flying by your ass.

Robie has done it before but has no wish to do it tonight or any other night.

But in a few seconds it won't matter. What will be will be.

He silently counts to five.

Gun. Knife.

He slows. They catch up to him. Their lights sweep across his back. He hears their collective breaths. Their smells. Sweat, cologne; the garlic they had in their meals. Their last meals.

*Or mine, depending on how it goes.*

*It's time.*

He turns.

The knife takes out the point man. He drops to the floor trying to hold in his severed intestines. Robie shoots the second man in the face. The sound of the suppressed round is like a hard slap. It echoes off the rock walls and mingles with the screams of the dying men.

The others are reacting now. They are good. But they are not truly professionals. They are muscle unaccustomed to being challenged. They prey on the weak, and the poorly skilled. Robie is neither. Their strategy is to react, not attack in a smart, methodical, organized way. There are three of them left, but only two will be any trouble. Robie has the clear advantage of surprise. He will not waste it.

Robie hurls the knife and its point ends up in the third man's chest. He drops with a heart split nearly in half. The man behind him fires, but Robie has already moved using the third man as a shield. The walls are asymmetrical. The bullet hits the rock wall, part of it shears off and stays in the wall. Part of it ricochets off and finds purchase in the opposite wall. The man fires a second and third time, but he misses his target because his adrenaline has spiked, blown his fine motor skills and caused his aim to fail. And it doesn't help that it is dark and his target is moving. He next



does a spray and pray, emptying his mag. Bullets bounce off hard rock. One slug hits the point man in the head on a ricochet. It doesn't kill him because he's already bled out. The fifth man has thrown himself to the hard floor, hands over his head.

Robie has seen all of this. He drops to the floor ~~too~~, kicks backward and in the same motion brings his pistol up between his knees, locks the gun between them and fires, *one shot into the*

~~One shot~~

Forehead of man number four. Those are the names he has given them. Numbers. Faceless. Easier to kill that way. ~~But in a way, they are easy to kill anyway.~~

Man Number Five now is the only one left.

Five is the sole reason Will Robie flew to Edinburgh today. The others are just collateral. Their deaths are meaningless in the grand scheme. ~~Only their families or friends, if they have any, will mourn them.~~

~~The flashlights dropped by the dead provide enough illumination for the two men to see each other.~~

Number Five rises and then backs up as Robie gets to his feet. Five has no weapon. He saw no need to carry one. Weapons are beneath him. He is no doubt rethinking that decision.

He begs. He pleads. He will pay. An unlimited amount. Then when the pistol is pointed at him he turns to threats. What an important man he is. How powerful his friends are. What he will do to Robie. How much pain he will suffer. He and his whole family.

Robie does not listen to any of it. He has heard it before.

He fires twice.

Right and left side of the brain. ~~No neuromuscular stone left unturned.~~

Always fatal. As it is tonight.

Number Five kisses the stone floor, and with his last breath hurls an expletive at Robie, that neither one of them hears.

Robie turns and walks through the same cleft as the tour guide.

Scotland didn't kill him.

He is thankful for this.



XXXXX ← (asterisks)  
^ THREE  
FOUR

Robie slept soundly after killing five men.

He awoke at six and ate breakfast at a ~~hole in the wall~~ café around the ~~corner from his room~~ <sup>where he was slaying</sup>. He actually prefers holes in the walls to linen napkins and clinking silverware on china plates. He hears sirens coming and going. That is not unexpected. Edinburgh is a wounded city this morning. It is a tourist destination and tourists don't like murders of other tourists.

He puts an unlighted cigarette between his teeth and listens some more. He killed five men last night and the police would love to find him. They won't. Yet how does he feel about slaughtering five human beings?

He doesn't feel. Not anymore. In fact, he isn't sure if he ever did. From the first trigger pull over a decade ago to the mayhem caused last night.

Later he walked to Waverly Station next to the Balmoral Hotel, and then took a train to London. ~~On the trip down the coast he reads on his phone screen that men have been killed in Edinburgh, their bodies discovered in the underground early that morning. The article does not say who they are or how they were killed.~~

Robie is not surprised by this gap in the story. These are special men. The information flow around their deaths will have to be carefully vetted. The media will circle, but they only will be given little bits and pieces of news. That is how the world works now, even in the 24/7 information cycle, when the victims are special.

There are few clues, no suspects, the story says. Robie does not expect that to ever change.

He arrived in London at King's Cross Station over four hours later and ~~paid nearly seventy pounds to~~ <sup>took a</sup> cab to Heathrow. The British Airways 777 lifted off later that afternoon. With a weak head wind the plane touched down seven hours ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> eight minutes later at Dulles Airport. It ~~was~~ <sup>had been</sup> cloudy and chilly in Scotland. It ~~is~~ <sup>was</sup> hot and dry in Virginia. The sun had long ago begun to drift low into the west. Clouds have built up during the heat of the day, but there ~~will be~~ <sup>would be</sup> no storm because there ~~is~~ <sup>was</sup> no moisture. All Mother Nature ~~can do~~ <sup>could</sup> ~~to~~ <sup>was</sup> look threatening.

Robie produced his U.S. passport, one of seven different ones he possessed, and passed swiftly through customs. The name on the passport was not Will Robie



For obvious reasons he could not use his real name. Some computer database somewhere would pick up the fact that he was in cities around the world where people ended up dead. Big Brother was just that, more powerful now than even George Orwell had imagined.

He had nothing to declare on entering his home country. His reason for going overseas was business. He was welcomed back to the States by the customs officer. By the time he got outside it was very nearly dark.

A car was waiting for him. There was no name on a placard. ~~He knows it's his~~ <sup>outside the airport terminal</sup> side both by the make and model and by the license plate.

Black SUV.

Government plates.

He got in, clicked the seatbelt home and lifted up a copy of *The Washington Post* that sat on the seat. He gave the driver no instruction. He <sup>knew</sup> ~~knows~~ where to go.

Traffic on the Dulles Toll Road <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ surprisingly light. ~~Surprisingly because these days there is no road in the area that is not crammed with too many cars, no matter the hour of the day or night. New roads could not keep pace with the number of new drivers.~~

Robie's phone vibrated. He looked at the screen.

One word: *Congratulations*.

He put the phone back in his jacket pocket.

Congratulations was the wrong word, he believed. *Thanks* would be the wrong word too. He <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ not sure what the right one would be <sup>actually</sup> ~~actually~~ for killing five people.

Perhaps there was none. Perhaps silence would suffice.

He arrived at a building off Chain Bridge Road in northern Virginia. There <sup>would</sup> ~~will~~ be no debriefing. ~~They don't do such things for the sorts of tasks Robie takes on.~~ It would be too problematic. No record of anything is better. If an investigation ensued no one <sup>could</sup> ~~can~~ discover a record that <sup>didn't</sup> ~~doesn't~~ exist.

~~And what else is there to be said?~~

~~Robie did not make this rule. But he has to live by it. And he actually agrees with it in principle. But there is a downside for him of course.~~



But if  
 All things go wrong ~~went wrong~~ he would have  
 No official cover.

He would hang alone.

He ~~goes~~<sup>walked</sup> to an office, not officially his, but one that he sometimes use<sup>d</sup>. Even though it is late there ~~are~~<sup>were</sup> people working. There ~~are~~<sup>are</sup> people always working in the ordinary looking brick building with the generic signage. The only capitulation to out of the ordinary here is the security checkpoint manned by someone who is armed and solidly professional at what he does.

People there ~~do~~<sup>They</sup> not talk to Robie. They don't even look at him. He ~~knows~~<sup>knows</sup> they have no idea what he does, but they also ~~know~~<sup>know</sup> not to interact with him. They follow orders. It is a good idea to do so here.

He ~~slits~~<sup>a</sup> at a desk, hit<sup>s</sup> some keys on the computer, send<sup>s</sup> a few emails and stare<sup>s</sup> out a window that really ~~isn't~~<sup>wasn't</sup> a window, but ~~just~~<sup>it was merely</sup> a box of simulated sunlight, because a window ~~is~~<sup>was</sup> just a hole that other<sup>s</sup> ~~can~~<sup>could</sup> get through.

An hour later a chubby man in a wrinkled suit with pasty skin ~~comes~~<sup>comes</sup> in. They ~~didn't~~<sup>didn't</sup> greet each other. Chubby place<sup>s</sup> a flash drive down on the desk in front of Robie. Then he pivot<sup>s</sup> and ~~leaves~~<sup>left</sup>. Robie stare<sup>s</sup> down at the silver object. The next assignment ~~is~~<sup>was</sup> already ready. They have ~~been~~<sup>been</sup> coming at an increasing clip these last few years. He realize<sup>s</sup> that says far more about his employers and the state of the world than it does about him.

He pocket<sup>s</sup> the flash and ~~leaves~~<sup>left</sup>. This time he drive<sup>s</sup> himself, in an Audi that ~~is~~<sup>was</sup> parked in a space in the adjacent garage. When he slide<sup>s</sup> into the seat he feel<sup>s</sup> ~~felt~~<sup>felt</sup> comfortable. The Audi ~~is~~<sup>was</sup> his, has ~~been~~<sup>been</sup> for four years. He drove it through the security checkpoint. The guard ~~does~~<sup>did</sup> not look at him either.

The invisible man in Edinburgh.

Robie knows how it feels.

Once he hit<sup>s</sup> the public road he shift<sup>s</sup> gears and accelerate<sup>s</sup>.

His phone vibrat<sup>s</sup> once more. He check<sup>s</sup> the screen.

Happy Birthday.

It ~~doesn't~~<sup>didn't</sup> make him smile. It ~~doesn't~~<sup>didn't</sup> make him do anything other than drop the phone on the opposite seat and punch the gas.



There would be no cake and no candles.

As he drove, Robie thought of the underground tunnel in Edinburgh. Four of the dead <sup>men</sup> were bodyguards. They were hard, desperate men who had allegedly murdered at least fifty people over the last five years, some of them children. The fifth man with two holes in his head was Carlos Rivera, a trafficker of ~~both heroin and~~ <sup>heroin and</sup> youngsters for prostitution <sup>and heroin for a living hell for the user.</sup> He was immensely rich and had been visiting Scotland on holiday <sup>at least ostensibly.</sup> Although Robie knew <sup>though</sup> that Rivera actually had been in Edinburgh to attend a high-level meeting with another criminal czar from Russia in an effort to merge ~~and thus~~ <sup>globalize</sup> their business interests.

He had not been ordered to kill Rivera because of his human and drug trafficking businesses. Robie's employer was not into altruism. Rivera had to die because the U.S. had learned that he was contemplating a coup in Mexico with the aid of several high-ranking generals in the Mexican army. The resulting government would have been no friend of the United States <sup>and thus</sup> ~~that~~ could not be allowed to happen. The meeting with the Russian crime czar had been the setup, the carrot. There was no czar and no meeting. The offending Mexican generals were also dead, killed by men like Robie.

When Robie arrived home he walked for two hours through the darkened streets. He went down by the river and watched the headlights on the Virginia side cut through the night. A police patrol boat slid past on the calm surface of the Potomac.

He stared up at the moonless sky.

*Happy Birthday to me.*

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③  
THREE  
See "insert A"



## ASSIGNMENTS

### WRITING EXERCISES AND FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

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1. It's never too early to begin editing. Go back to the chapters you've written so far and reread them, paying special attention to the pacing. Does anything feel too slow? Are there any places where there is too much dialogue or too much exposition? What words can you cut out without losing the meaning or flavor of your writing?
2. Use this exercise to tighten up a scene. Select a scene where you've described something in one paragraph or more. Perhaps your characters are entering a building, and you've shown the reader where the building is, what it looks like, or the mood it seems to cast over your characters. Take that information and "unpack" it—that is, spread it out over the rest of the scene. Blend it in with moments of dialogue. Look at details through your character's eyes. Are there any details you can use to create suspense? See how much excess information you can discard.
3. This exercise will help you match up your intentions with what you've written so far. Read through the first chapter of your novel and answer the question: What did I accomplish in this chapter? Write the answer in one sentence on a page in your notebook titled "First Draft Overview." Now go on to the next chapter. Continue doing this throughout the writing of your novel until you have every chapter summarized in one line. At any point, go back to the outline or mini outlines you developed in Chapter 5: Outlining, and compare your First Draft Overview now with the intentions you developed for your chapters earlier. How do the two match up?



**I**N THIS CHAPTER, David shares his advice on selecting an editor and on what sort of relationship you should cultivate with yours.

## LEARN MORE

### CHOOSING AN EDITOR

When you sell your novel, you'll be selling it to an editor in a publishing house. In some cases, multiple publishers will want to buy your manuscript, and you will have a choice of editors. This much interest is somewhat unusual for beginning novelists, but it does happen (take Cynthia D'Aprix Sweeney's debut novel, *The Nest*, which sold to Ecco for seven figures). No matter how many editors are interested in your novel, you should take a good look at their credentials before choosing one. Editors are a hugely important part of your publishing process, so you'll want to do everything you can to ensure a good fit:

**Look at their backlist.** Editors are usually keen to share the books they've worked on in the past. Ask your editor for a list of their previous authors, or even copies of their favorite books. Do you like the editor's tastes? Do they have experience working with books that are similar to yours?

**Check references.** Talk to other writers who've worked with that editor. Reach out via email, and ask what their experiences were. An editor may seem shipshape on the surface, but other authors can usually give you a deeper view.



**Ask about their expectations.** It's good to find out what your editor plans for your book up front. Will they edit the novel themselves? (Some editors give this job entirely to assistants.) How long is it projected to take? How many rounds of editing do they expect to do? How much do they anticipate wanting to change? Ask to see a sample editorial letter—a letter they've written to another author that shows the kind of editing advice they've given to that person—to get a sense of their style.


**Look for personal chemistry.** You'll usually have the chance to talk to an editor on the phone before signing any contracts with them. Pay attention to the way you get along with this person. They may not be the perfect editor, but if you feel a connection with them—either personal or creative—that can be more important than anything else.

## UNDERSTANDING PUBLISHING HOUSES

A typical publishing house is made up of a publisher, editors, an acquisitions team, a production team, sales and marketing teams, rights and distribution teams, and a finance department. Each house will have its own organizational structure, but when people say “publisher,” they usually mean the managing director, or CEO.

Most of the time, you'll need an agent to help you find an editor. (We'll cover more on that in Chapter 14: Navigating the Publishing Business, Part 1). The editors of major publishing houses don't usually look at unsolicited manuscripts unless those manuscripts come from agents. However, it is possible to speak to an editor directly at the [New York Pitch Conference](#). This conference holds a pitchfest four times a year, where authors attend workshops to polish their pitching strategies and then pitch their work to different editors from major publishing houses. Many conferences will also have a pitchfest where you can speak to editors and agents directly. You'll see more on that in Chapter 15: Navigating the Publishing Business, Part 2.

“Sometimes they're a great editor, but you just don't connect with them. And if you don't, it's kind of hard to have trust and confidence in that person.”



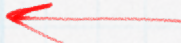
## EDITING ALONGSIDE AN EDITOR

Once you've decided on an editor, you'll begin editing your manuscript. Most editors will do some sort of content (or developmental) edit, followed by a line edit. A content edit will address larger, structural issues like the



development of your plot, your character arcs, and the way you handle your setting. Once the big issues are resolved, a line edit usually follows, which is a study of the smaller details—your language style, grammar, and the consistency of minor story elements—and is usually done by a copyediting team. You will have to approve and respond to the copy editor's changes before the manuscript will go on to a proofreading team for a final check of spelling and formatting.

“At the end of the day, you—the writer—are the master and commander.”



## COLLABORATION IS KEY, BUT YOU HAVE THE FINAL SAY

The ideal editorial relationship is based on trust. When your editor asks you to change things, or casts doubt on your decisions about characters and plot, it can trigger negative reactions. You'll need to trust your editor to know that they're raising these queries for the best reasons. It's also helpful to remember that you don't need an editor to pat you on the back; you need them to catch your weaknesses. Editorial advice can spark inspiration, clarity, and surprising connections in your revisions. Editors can also give suggestions you simply don't like. If you disagree on a change, you should talk to them about why they suggested those changes. They may have insights that compel you, or they may simply be wrong. And always remember that you have the final say.

## WORKSHOPPING YOUR NOVEL

Publishing a novel may seem far off, but you can begin editing at any stage. Ideally, you'll get feedback from readers before even beginning the search for an agent. Having critique partners is an invaluable benefit. A trusted writers' group is an excellent place to start, but if you don't have that, look for readers who like the type of writing you do and who are relatively objective. Try trading your manuscript with another writer for mutual feedback. If you're comfortable sharing your work with strangers, go to [Writer's Café](#), an online community where you can post your work, get advice from other writers, or join a writing group to improve your craft.



## ASSIGNMENTS

### WRITING ASSIGNMENTS AND FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

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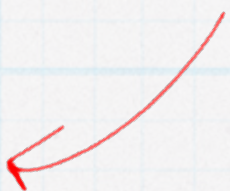
Find a critique partner in person or online. You can do this at any stage, but it's best to go with your own comfort level. If you want to wait until you've finished a complete draft, then wait. Clarify with your partner up front what level of feedback you'd both like. Some people want grammatical edits only; others may be more interested in addressing structure or plot points. If you're new to critiquing someone else's work, use these guidelines:

Note anything that really impressed you—plot points, character development, language. People are always grateful to hear praise. But you also want to note the things that need improvement. It's crucial for writers to know what is and is not landing with the reader so that writers can reconsider their strategies. If an author has made a promise and broken it, explain what you thought the promise was and what you were expecting.



**D**AVID GIVES ADVICE on maintaining control of your career during the publication process. Be a partner to your publisher, but keep your international book rights, and prepare for your own publicity.

"No one in the world will care more about your career—not your agent, not your publisher, not your best friend—than you."



### STAY IN CONTROL OF YOUR CAREER

David's advice—don't abdicate control of your career—requires that you learn about the industry you're joining. For a writer, it's easy to let your agent or publisher handle the business side of things. This is almost always a mistake. Start informing yourself now about how publishers operate, how agents work, and what to expect from the industry in general, and you'll be better positioned to stay in control of your career.

Once you've finished your novel, it can be difficult to know what to do next. These are the traditional steps a manuscript passes through on its way to publication:

1. Writer writes the book
2. Agent represents it
3. Publisher/editorial committee buys the book from you and your agent
4. Editor, copy editor, proofreader edit your novel
5. Book designer creates cover art and jacket design
6. Printing
7. Marketing team promotes your book through a wide variety of media
8. Sales team sells your book to retailers, libraries, etc.



9. Store buyer purchases your book
10. Store manager places the book in the store
11. Booksellers/store employees sell your book to customers
12. Consumer reads your book

## DON'T SKIP CONFERENCES

Conferences are an invaluable help if you're looking to network with other writers, publishers, and agents (and sometimes readers). They will usually provide educational programs geared toward specific genres.

**ThrillerFest.** Sponsored by the International Thriller Writers Association (ITW), this is the premier annual conference in America that focuses on thriller writing. The July gathering in New York is a place for authors to meet fellow writers, connect with agents and publishers, learn new craft techniques, and find out what's going on in the industry.

**Bouchercon.** This festival is also renowned for its high-profile guest speakers and for embracing mystery and thriller authors worldwide. It invites readers, booksellers, and librarians to mingle with the crowds, which can be a huge boost if you're published and hoping to build a fan base. It's held in a different city every year.

**Malice Domestic.** This fan convention, held every April in Washington, D.C., celebrates a subgenre of mystery writing called "cozy mysteries" (mysteries that downplay overtly sexual or violent crime). Every year it presents the Agatha Awards, so named for cozy mystery writer Agatha Christie.

**Killer Nashville.** Open to all levels, this Nashville-based conference held annually in August focuses on crime writing. You can talk to specialists and attend workshops on a wide variety of crime-writing topics.

**SleuthFest.** For mystery, suspense, and thriller writers, this conference is coordinated by the Mystery Writers of America. It's held every February in Boca Raton, Florida.

(For a more comprehensive list of conferences, [check out this list](#) from the website Sisters in Crime.)



As you saw in Chapter 13: Working With an Editor, most conferences will include some kind of pitchfest where you can pitch your novel directly to an agent or an editor. Think of it like speed dating, only with a novel. [ThrillerFest](#) has an excellent one. You may also consider the [Writer's Digest Annual Conference](#). If you'd like to try your hand at pitching your book online, many agents and editors sponsor pitchfests on Twitter. You can scan through a list of these events [here](#).

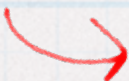
Also consider joining a writers' association, which can provide similar benefits to its members through online connectivity.

**[International Thriller Writers Association](#)**. Membership is open to published and nonpublished thriller authors, whose work may reflect mystery, detective, suspense, horror, adventure, and other subjects.

**[Mystery Writers of America](#)**. An organization that supports published and aspiring writers through education, community, and legal advocacy. (Its motto is "Crime doesn't pay...enough.") The group also has regional chapters that hold regular meetings.

**[The Authors Guild](#)**. This professional organization is open to all working writers. The guild advocates for authors' rights and provides free legal and contractual advice to its members.

"I could negotiate my own deals now. But it's not just about the money; it's about the counsel, the sage advice."



## WORKING WITH AN AGENT


If you want to sell your novel to a traditional, mainstream publishing house, you're going to need an agent. Most big publishers won't look at manuscripts unless they come from agents, so finding the right person to lobby on your book's behalf is going to be a critical step in your career. An agent will handle numerous aspects of your business: They'll help perfect your manuscript, they'll sell it to an editor, they'll negotiate your contract with a publishing company, they'll handle all the finances, and they'll keep an eye on the publisher throughout the publishing process. David recommends finding an agent with whom you have chemistry. Much like with an editor, you need to be able to trust the person who'll be handling such major aspects of your career. David now has enough industry knowledge



and power that he could sell and negotiate contracts for his books by himself, but he sees his agent as a trusted ally and confidant who is interested in the development of his career.

If you're just starting out, pick up a copy of *Publishing 101: A First-Time Author's Guide to Getting Published, Marketing and Promoting Your Book, and Building a Successful Career* (2014) by Jane Friedman. This guide goes into the gritty details of what you need to do to find an agent, how to market and promote your work, and ways to protect your rights throughout the publishing process.

"If I could use one word to describe a relationship between an author and a publisher, it would be *marriage*."



## WORKING WITH A PUBLISHER

So you've found that great agent and you've sold your novel to a publisher—congratulations! You may be tempted to let the publisher take over from here. But don't do it. You are a partner in the publishing process, and you should start preparing for the upcoming challenges. You'll learn more about these in Chapter 15: Navigating the Publishing Business, Part 2, but for now, it's good to know what will be expected of you.

First, always be serious about your craft. This means staying open to feedback of all kinds. Even though this is still your book, you'll have to negotiate your interests with a variety of people over all sorts of issues: story structure, book design, marketing strategies, etc. If you're serious about your craft, you'll handle each step with passion and professionalism.

Your publisher will undoubtedly market your book, but when it comes to publicity, you have much more power than your publisher. You are the one who will be speaking to crowds, talking to interviewers, and getting readers interested in your book. You'll be creating a social media presence, blogging, vlogging, and erstwhile creating a stir online. Traditionally, publishers would send authors on book tours. Today, new authors are more likely to go on a "blog tour" and not much else. Negotiate with your publisher about marketing plans, then pick up the slack for the things they won't cover. It's in the best interest of your book sales and your long-term career. As a first-time author, you'll have to do a lot of work to prepare for publication, so start researching now. There are thousands of




resources online for this, but a good place to start is with *The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published* (2010) by Arielle Eckstut and David Henry Sterry. It's an invaluable help for learning how to navigate the marketing process.

## SELF-PUBLISHING

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"I've made far more money selling books overseas than I would have if I'd sold my rights away to my American publisher."



You may decide that the traditional route is not for you. In recent years, self-publishing has become an industry of its own with many success stories. If you choose to self-publish, you'll have to cover a lot of the publishing steps yourself. Check out *Let's Get Digital* (2018) by David Gaughran for some concrete advice on going it alone.

## UNDERSTANDING PUBLISHING RIGHTS

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Every time a publisher buys your book, they will pay an advance on royalties. This is usually a lump sum that your publisher will expect you to pay back via the sales of your book. A royalty is the percentage of the revenue you will earn from each of your book sales. The royalties on your book will be calculated over time, and your royalty rate will be negotiated in your contract. A typical breakdown might look like this:

1. You receive an advance from your publisher of \$50,000
2. Your book sells for \$25
3. Your royalty rate is 10 percent (10 percent to 15 percent is typical for a first-time author)
4. You make \$2.50 on every book sold
5. That \$2.50 goes to pay back the \$50,000 advance.
6. You need to sell 20,000 books in order to pay back the advance
7. After you've sold 20,000 books, you begin to earn royalties directly, which your publisher will pay out (usually twice a year)

Ten percent may seem paltry, but remember that your publisher is incurring costs for editing, printing, marketing, etc. It's not the end of the world if your book doesn't sell enough copies to pay back your advance, but the more success you have as an author, the stronger position you'll be in to negotiate higher advances and royalties for future books.



The good news is that every country has the right to purchase your book. This means you could see contracts from multiple territories for a single book. These world-publishing rights are yours to sell. Sometimes your American publisher will want to buy the world rights from you so they can sell your novel to different countries and receive some profit on the sales. Traditional publishers are good at selling novels overseas, but typically they will try to sell your book for a few only months and then they turn to their other books. This means that your world rights could languish in limbo with a busy or lazy publisher. David recommends that you keep your world rights. Most literary agencies will handle the rights for you, and if they're good agencies, they'll continue selling those rights long after your book's publication.

## ASSIGNMENTS

### WRITING EXERCISES AND FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

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In order to find an agent, you'll need to craft a suspenseful query letter. A good letter is usually made up of three things: a description of your book, a description of why you're writing to this particular agent, and a brief bio of yourself. The next three assignments will help you get started on the description of your book.

1. The meat of your query letter will be your pitch—a short description of your book. Write a synopsis in your notebook in the following format:
  - In the first few sentences, introduce your main character and his/her situation. Try to blend in a brief description of the world of your novel.
  - In the second sentence, describe the major plot turn that happens to your main character. What complicates their life? Mention any significant secondary characters—sidekicks, villains—only if necessary.
2. Every query letter should open with a hook. What makes your story stand out? What's interesting about your story? What would catch someone's attention? On a page in your notebook, start brainstorming hooks. Try the following:



- Paint a powerfully vivid scene for your reader
- Startle the reader with an unbelievable fact
- Ask a question
- Present a situation that just has to be resolved


Now combine the above—the synopsis and the hook—into 50 words or less. If you'd like to look at some examples, *Writer's Digest* has an ongoing column featuring query letters that worked (and which successfully got their authors representation by an agent). You can read those queries and how the agents responded to them [here](#).

**3.** Begin researching agents online. Try out any of the following websites, which offer agent listings for free (you may need to register).

- [Publishers' Marketplace](#)
- [AgentQuery.com](#)
- [QueryTracker.net](#)



**D**AVID OFFERS numerous suggestions for keeping your career on track—build a fan base, network with booksellers, and stay focused on your craft.

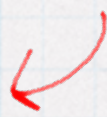


### UTILIZING BOOKSELLERS

"The best thing about book-sellers is they hand-sell books."

For writers, booksellers are an often-overlooked aspect of the marketing process. These are the men and women staffing bookstores who talk directly to readers and have the power to recommend your book to people who want to read it. Whether or not your publisher sends you on an actual tour, you should look for opportunities to connect with booksellers. Go into local bookstores and introduce yourself to the people behind the counter or to the people who manage events. Tell them about your book and strike up a conversation about the store. Don't be afraid to ask specific questions about their sales, their foot traffic, or their attitude toward book signings. Most bookstores have time and space set aside for readings, and you can often arrange those yourself. Meeting booksellers in person can be informative, inspiring, and an all-around career booster, so create the opportunity whenever you can.

"There are lots of ways to build a fan base. The best way to do it is to write really great stories consistently."



### FINDING YOUR FAN BASE

One of the things you'll be doing during your career is building a fan base. This means developing relationships with readers who are devoted to your work. David attributes his success in this to two things: First, he has multiple series going at once, which keeps a wide variety of



his fans interested and engaged. Second, he takes marketing seriously, going to readings, signings, and other events. For more detailed advice, *How to Market a Book, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (2017) by Joanna Penn (aka thriller author J.F. Penn) is a brilliant guide that will take you through the process of developing your own marketing fundamentals and strategizing ways to promote yourself on all kinds of platforms.

"If you come out every five years with a commercial fiction book, people are going to forget about you."

## WRITE A BOOK EVERY YEAR

If you're a beginning author, your publisher may tell you not to worry about your next book until you see how well the first one has sold. But this may not be a wise decision. If you're serious about your career, you'll continue writing. Readers are more tolerant of time gaps between novels with literary authors, but with most types of genre fiction—especially series—you'll want to keep producing books in a consistent and timely way. A rule of thumb is to try to write a book every year.

## COUNTERACTING THE SOPHOMORE SLUMP

Once your book has been published, plan a celebration and be proud of your success—but don't quit your day job just yet. It's very common for first-time authors to have success with a first novel only to find it difficult to get the next novel written or published. This "sophomore slump" can happen at any stage of your career. The business side of writing can be very demanding. Opportunities that arise—in film or TV, say—can take up a lot of time and often have little payoff. It's important to avoid getting distracted. Don't spend time worrying about the things you can't control. Instead, follow David's advice and stay focused on your writing. David took his laptop on a 15-country book tour and worked on his next novel during that time. Continuing to write will not only keep you grounded in your craft; it is also the most important tool to keep your career going.

"A lot of first-time novelists...get swept up in all the cool, exotic stuff of being published for the first time, and they forget what got them there: thinking about what you're going to write."



## ASSIGNMENTS

### WRITING EXERCISES AND FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

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1. You can begin preparing your publicity materials as soon as you've finished your novel. Start by considering how you're going to talk about your book. Pretend you're describing your novel to an audience who is curious about it. Create a 10- to 15-minute talk describing your novel. Your main objective is to capture people's interest, so use your tools of suspense. Give the audience just enough to raise a question in their mind. Use the hook and pitch material from the assignments in Chapter 14: Navigating the Publishing Business, Part 1, but remember you'll be speaking out loud here, so try to talk naturally about it. Let yourself be spontaneous. Use these questions to help shape your talk:
  - Why will a reader care about this story?
  - Does anything in this story directly affect the reader?
  - What makes your main character interesting or different?
  - What makes your setting interesting?
  - Can you share any personal information related to the story? (i.e., Your novel is about navy search and rescue, and you were a former marine.)
2. Using the hook and pitch material from the assignments in Chapter 14: Navigating the Publishing Business, Part 1, practice giving short answers about your novel. Do this exercise out loud. Imagine someone has just asked you "What is your novel about?" and you're answering the question. Practice giving a straight answer ("It's a thriller about the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, a group of soldiers and scientists who are tasked with finding all the missing soldiers from America's wars.") Then practice withholding information in a way that begs a question ("It's a thriller about the DPAA." Or "It's about the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency."). Your imaginary conversation partner will ask, "What's the DPAA?" Come up with a reply that leads to more questions.



**D**AVID REVEALS THE STORY elements and tools you'll need to write a series. He discusses different types of series and the importance of consistency.

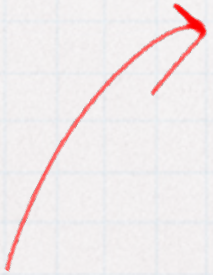
## LEARN MORE

### DO YOU WANT TO WRITE A SERIES?

You may be starting your first novel and doubting your ability to create a series out of it. But the success of a series doesn't depend on your experience—it depends on your material and how you feel about it. Do you want to keep spending time with your characters? Can they plausibly continue to go on the sort of quests and overcome the kind of struggles you want them to face? Can you continue to deepen your characters in interesting ways? Is there more to explore in the world you've created, and do you want to explore it? You'll be able to answer these questions while writing your novel, so trust your instincts.

If you think you have a series on your hands, you don't have to write the next book right away, but you might want to do the following things in your first book:

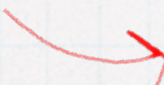
**Choose complex subjects.** Series thrive from the tension created by complex issues that are difficult to resolve. Dr. Alan Grant survived *Jurassic Park* (1990), but so did a whole bunch of carnivorous dinosaurs. Common sense says that the dinosaurs should have been killed to protect humanity, but lawyers, scientists, and financiers disagreed. Author Michael Crichton made sure that these opposing interests remained strong at the end of his first novel, setting up future books in the series.



"If you have the juice and you have the desire and the motivation and the material to start out writing a series, go for it."



"If readers don't think you can master your own material, they don't trust you to do anything else right, so you've lost them."



**Don't make situations easy.** Certain things don't ever have to be resolved. Is a character's career on the skids? Don't end it. Are two people attracted to each other? Don't let them hook up. Try to get some mileage out of your story elements.

**Hide Easter eggs for fun.** An Easter egg is a subtle or hidden message you include in one book that will refer to a future one. (This term can also refer to other books or movies or cultural elements in general.) Your attentive fans will appreciate when a character who's casually mentioned in your first book appears in a much more robust context in your third book.

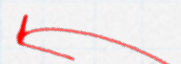
### KEEP TRACK OF YOUR OWN STORYLINES

When you're writing a series, it can be easy to forget where you left off or what kind of character arcs you developed in your previous novels. Always go back to your outlines—or even reread your previous books—to make sure you remain consistent with your characters and storylines. If your characters' situations change dramatically between books, you'll have to give a plausible reason for those changes. This may take some development, some back-story, or even new subplots, all of which will have to be worked into your new book.

### WHAT KIND OF SERIES DO YOU WANT TO WRITE?

There are three basic types of series, differentiated by the sequence in which a reader should approach them:

1. In the first type of series, you must read the books in order, meaning you'll probably be lost if you don't start at the beginning. For example, it isn't easy to pick up George R.R. Martin's fourth *A Song of Ice and Fire* novel and expect to understand the story since so much depends on knowing the events of previous books.
2. The second type of series tends to follow a single character over the course of many novels, but you don't have to read them in order. While each book may be a development of a previous one, the writer crafts it so that each one can stand alone if need be. David's books fall into this category.



"Series allow you another chance to dig at these characters, to deepen them, to get into their heads a little bit more, and to see them grow and evolve."



3. In the third type of series, the books don't follow a single character but are tied together by a common theme and sometimes by overlapping characters. Tana French's Dublin Murder Squad series contains six novels, each of which introduces a new main character and follows an entirely different type of investigation. Occasionally a character from one book will show up in another. (This type of series even has a special name: roman-fleuve.)

If you're like David and you're writing the second kind of series, it's good to quickly refresh your reader's memory about previous happenings early on in every new book. This can be done in a few paragraphs or even a few lines. You'll have to do this carefully: You want to inform new readers but not bore the people who've already read your other books. Try to present the information in a short, suspenseful way—think of how TV shows recap relevant storylines at the top of each episode. You probably won't be putting your recap on page one—remember, you should always start with a Big Pop. It's better to find places in your first few chapters where it feels appropriate to bring your reader up to speed.

### LEAVING THE DOOR TO A SERIES OPEN

You won't always know if you want to continue with a character when you come to the end of a novel, but it's good to leave the possibility open. Give yourself some wiggle room at the end of the book. At the end of *Memory Man* (2015), David wasn't sure whether he wanted to write more in the series, so he let Amos Decker accept a job on an FBI task force. This kept the possibility open for future Decker novels. Don't rush into writing a series, and definitely don't keep writing on autopilot. Take an honest audit before continuing with a character, and take David's advice: If you don't want to spend more time with them, move on to something new.



"It comes down to one question: Do you want to spend more time with these characters? If you do, bring them back; if you don't, move on."



## ASSIGNMENTS

### WRITING EXERCISES AND FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

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The following three exercises will help you work on developing complexity in your novel. Complexity can come in many forms, but be sure to focus especially on your main characters and your world.

1. Go back to your “Interests” and “Research Interests” pages, and look over the entries. Try to put two of your entries together in a new or surprising way. As you read each entry, consider related topics. Does an entry make you think of something else, perhaps seemingly unconnected? This is a brainstorming session, so trust your instincts.
2. Invent a backstory of dilemmas or personal challenges (aka “baggage”) for one of your characters. For example, a character is a world-famous paleontologist, but he hates children. You might explain that he never had children of his own, and he finds them idiotic. Now imagine a situation where your character is either forced to deal with this flaw, or where this flaw gets him into trouble. Write your ideas in your notebook.
3. Write a few paragraphs in your notebook describing the most positive attribute of your villain. This can be a personal quality (they are good to their children, for example) or an explanation of how they’ve become who they are. Make sure this explanation provides a sense of genuine fairness and understanding. Write a scene in which your villain reveals this attribute or history.



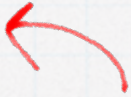
**D**AVID OFFERS SOME final advice on keeping your career on track and balancing writing with the rest of your life. Practice perseverance, understand that rejection is part of the game, and stick with the topics and stories that thrill you.

### REJECTION WILL ALWAYS BE PART OF THE PROCESS

No matter what kind of success you achieve, you will be dealing with rejection throughout your writing career. David has some pointers for turning those down moments into growth opportunities:

**Persevere.** Rejection is a momentary experience and should not determine the course of your entire career. It can be tempting to believe that when someone rejects you, it means you're no good and that you should stop. Don't let other people control your path. If writing is your goal, keep going.

**Take constructive criticism.** Sometimes rejection is honest and useful. It can tell you when something isn't working. Rejection can be a road sign that points you toward your weaknesses, so accept that information and keep developing your craft.



"Cockiness is not good for a writer. It's that wariness and that nervousness that give you the edge because you just try harder."



**Don't take it personally.** When rejection hurts, it's usually because you take it personally, but it's seldom personal. Choose to see the bigger picture: Your work won't be interesting to every single agent, but you only need one to see its promise. Continue improving your craft and searching for the people who support you.

There are plenty of pitfalls in the writing life. You've learned some tools for dealing with writer's blocks and the problems you may face in the publishing process, but the challenges David addresses here relate to larger aspects of your ongoing career:

**Make big decisions carefully.** Finding some success with your writing can bring change to every aspect of your life. Treat these welcome benefits as you would any other big change—with thoughtfulness and care.

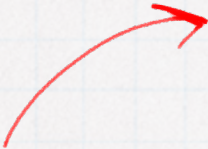
**Stretch outside your comfort zone.** Writing the same thing in the same way can eventually lead to stagnation. If you start to feel this way, try your hand at something new and unexpected. You should never have to be only one type of writer.

**Stay true to your story.** Sometimes life can get in the way of your writing—other commitments and personal situations can affect your feelings about your story and your characters. Try to protect your novels when another aspect of your life is causing intense distraction, even if it means stepping away from your work for a while.

**Take care of yourself physically.** Exercise keeps your mind in good shape, especially when you're sitting at a desk all day. Don't abandon other hobbies in the pursuit of writing. Strive for balance.

**Be honest about your interests.** If writing ever starts to feel like a chore, it may be time to reevaluate your interests. Go back to the things that thrill you—or find new things—and follow them, whatever they are.

**Keep filling your well of ideas.** Just like your characters, your writing will change over time. You'll find new topics and settings and themes. Keep searching for the things that spark your passion and curiosity. If you weave those interests into your work, your novels will evolve with you.



"If you keep doing what you love and you're never bored doing it—you know, that equals success. You've made it."



## ASSIGNMENTS

### WRITING EXERCISES AND FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

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Set aside a place for your writing inspirations. It can be an online file, but it's good to have a real-life file folder or box for other items—notes, pictures, objects, newspaper articles, etc. In the beginning, make a point to find something at least *once a week* that interests you. It doesn't have to be something you'll incorporate into your writing right away, just something that sparks your curiosity, delight, horror, amazement, etc. Most writers call this collection of found items a “compost heap” because over time the things in your box will provide nourishment for future writing. They may inspire you in unlikely ways, so continue coming back to the box, looking through it and adding to it every time you're inspired.



**D**AVID RETURNS TO the importance of passion and commitment in the craft of writing.


### PASSION AND PERSEVERANCE

You don't have to be someone special to be a writer—a lawyer, a celebrity, a creative genius. You only need two things: passion and perseverance. For David, his passion is writing itself. He never feels that he has to slog through each book; for him, each book is a pleasure because he takes his interests and applies them to his work. His perseverance comes into play when facing the difficulties of the writer's life (see Chapter 17: Life as a Writer). Your main takeaway from this course should be this: If you focus on your passion and apply it to your work, it will give you the strength to overcome your obstacles.

### ASSIGNMENTS

#### WRITING EXERCISES AND FOR YOUR WORKING NOVEL

No matter how far you've come in writing your novel, take a moment to consider your ending. On a page in your notebook, write out a brief sketch of your last chapter. What do you need to do in order to fulfill all the promises you've made to your reader? Are you going to leave some things open in case you want to work on future novels with these characters? This can be as simple as a list of bullet points, but if you get caught up in the writing, go ahead and write the scene(s) now. Writing your ending beforehand can help you realize what you have to accomplish before you get there, and it can shape the structure of the middle of your book.



"I always tell writers, 'Sit back and ask yourself: Why do I want to be a writer?' If the answer is 'I want to make a lot of money really fast,' that's not a good answer. If the answer is 'I love words and I love telling stories,' that's a really good answer. That means you're going to stay committed."